

Antique
Pageantry



By
Clifford
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ANTIQUE PAGEANTRY

By the Same Author

Poems Dramatic and Lyrical, 1911. A few remaining copies can be had from Hendersons

The Poetasters of Ispahan. A Comedy in Verse
1912. (*Out of print.*) Goschen

A House of Words (Poems) Blackwell 5s

HERE is a house of words
Built for the maker's mind.
Enter : and, if you will, stay with me long.
But, if you like it not,
Go with good grace. The man
Who builds his own house builds to please himself.

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ANTIQUE PAGEANTRY

A Book of Verse-plays

BY

CLIFFORD BAX

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LONDON: HENDERSONS

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1921

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THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

To H. F.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN.

First produced on April 28th, 1912, at the Little Theatre
by the Adelphi Play Society, under the management of
MR. MAURICE ELVEY, and with the following cast :

CHARACTERS :

HALLAJ, <i>the public letter-writer</i>	MR. MAURICE ELVEY.
NEJRIHAL, <i>a pastry-cook</i> .	MR. GOODWIN NOCK.
ALA'D'DIN, <i>a perfume-seller</i> .	MR. BERNARD MEREFIELD.
SULIMAN, <i>a barber</i> . . .	MR. ROSS SHORE.
GULEESH, <i>a miserly silk-merc</i>	MR. CAMPBELL CARGILL.
IBN-HASSIM, <i>a wealthy jeweller</i>	MR. JAMES L. DALE.
SILVERMOON, <i>his daughter</i> .	MISS BETTY BELLAIRS.
SLAVE-BOY.	MR. GORDON GAY.
FOUR NEGRO SLAVES	

In the summer of 1912 the play was produced as a
lever de rideau at the Criterion Theatre.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN.

[HALLAJ, the public letter-writer, is discovered sitting in the centre of the room where he works. He is young and beautiful, but plainly gowned, for he is a poor man. Scrolls, reed-pens, and ribbons lie about him. On the floor are several rugs.

The room is represented by long dark curtains which divide at the back, both to right and left. These openings are supposed to look up to a street, and the light beyond them changes from amber to sapphire-blue, and again from blue to warm purple as the play proceeds. Two handsome copper lamps hang from the roof by long chains.]

HALLAJ (*to the audience*).

My friends—well met, and be of good cheer !

For never, since Allah created man,
Was life more goodly to live than here

In the city of Ispahan.

If I see one heart that retains a care,

I will lower the curtain between us. Why,

We are here so gay that we often say

We cannot be sad though we try !

You meet me now in a sorry case,

But what is the use of a doleful face ?

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

Be sure I have done what I could to win
The maiden I love but have never seen !

And why do I love her ? Night and noon
I have lived with her sweet name—Silvermoon—
And surely a poet is hardly to blame

If he falls in love with a name ?
My poem is done : but how to fulfil
The other part of her father's will ?
What did he say, with his merchant's wit ?

‘Ten pieces of silver must go with it,’—
And how to make one piece look like ten ?

[Holding up a single silver coin.]

Well—I share that trouble with wiser men !
So few come now to this shop of mine
That I scarcely hope for the other nine ;
Well, well, it is folly to grumble. See,
There is only this one coin left to me,
But that which is written by Fate—must be !

[A string of little bells is struck without, and a moment later NEJRIHAL enters through the curtain to the left. HALLAJ at once rises to greet him ceremoniously.]

HALLAJ.

Pray, pardon me, Nejrihal. Had I but heard
That you purposed a visit, my floor had been strewn
With jasmine and rose : but you sent not a word.
How is it you shut up your oven so soon ?

NEJRIHAL.

O Summit of Wisdom ! O Prince of the Pen !
Is it true, as I have heard but a little while past

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

When I handed some dates to a party of men,
That the rich Ibn-hassim has offered at last
His daughter for marriage ?

HALLAJ.

It is.

NEJRIHAL.

And they say
That he who shall make the most elegant verse
In praise of her beauty shall bear her away ?

HALLAJ.

But the terms of the bargain could hardly be worse.

NEJRIHAL.

What are they, Hallaj ? For my part, I declare
The whole city may go without supper to bed,
If a song shall obtain me a virgin as fair
As the jeweller's daughter. What is it he said ?

HALLAJ.

You must finish your poem before the sun set.

NEJRIHAL.

Well, well, that is good. I have time and to spare,
For an hour, very nearly, remains to me yet.
Four lines and I've made it ! Why, once for the Sheikh

I prepared a whole feast in the course of an hour,
And, bethink you, I fashioned and coloured each cake
In the form and the hue of some separate flower.
That's a feat to be proud of ! But tell me, I pray,
Is a verse the whole matter ?

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

The name of the girl
Must be used as a rhyme for the rest, in the way
That a jeweller imprisons an emerald or pearl
In foliage of silver or plumage of gold.

NEJRIHAL.

Or just as a pasty is made to the mould!
My poem . . . I feel it emerging . . .

HALLAJ.

And then
You must write it in characters, clearly, like these.

NEJRIHAL.

But you know that I never could manage a pen!

HALLAJ.

Hallaj is your servant . . .

NEJRIHAL.

But what are your fees?

HALLAJ (*magniloquently*).

Why, sir, for a dinar of silver, I swear

I will write it so finely that people shall cry
Of a beautiful maiden that passes them by,
'She has looked on the poem of Nejrihal!'

NEJRIHAL (*giving him a piece of silver*).

There!

If it be as you say it is cheap at the price—

But now for my poem. Some clever device . . .

Let me think: I will tell her that she is the lamp
And I the poor moth—You upset me, my friend!
What more does he want of me? Come, make an
end!

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

Ten pieces of silver !

NEJRIHAL.

The greedy old scamp !

No matter. I'll pay them. How I am the lamp

And she the poor moth as it flutters . . . no, no——

You have spoilt my whole poem. Now, how did it go ?

[*The bells are sounded again. NEJRIHAL wanders off by himself, composing.*]

HALLAJ.

Who is there ?

VOICE WITHOUT.

It is I, it is I, Ala'd'din,

The vendor of perfumes.

HALLAJ.

Pray come in.

[*ALA'D'DIN enters through the curtain to the right, unnoticed by NEJRIHAL. He is not handsome, but being a great dandy, he makes his appearance conspicuous. His hair is arranged in little ringlets. He is tall and angular, and has small pointed features.*]

HALLAJ.

Truly this day

There must be junketing among my stars !

For though the scent of roses may be sweet,

Ascending from your gay and gilded jars,

Behold, I greet

One whose fine words are more to me than they.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

ALA'D'DIN.

If it be as you say,
Let us remember how the old proverb stands :
Work that is delicate makes for delicate hands.
But see . . . your friend ! He is not quite well, I fear ?

HALLAJ.

Why, it is Nejrihal the confectioner.
Surely you must have seen him many a time ?

ALA'D'DIN.

I ? Oh, dear no. But tell me, why does he roll
So wildly ?

HALLAJ.

He is upon the Sea of Rhyme !

ALA'D'DIN.

What ? What ? A pastry-cook with a poet's soul ?
But can *he* really think to pipe the tune
That shall secure the sweet girl Silvermoon ?
Excellent !

NEJRIHAL.

What an infernal noise you make !
Oho, 'tis you, my old friend Ala'd'din !
You have never paid me for that sesame-cake !
' Oh, crystal lamp that shows the flame within . . . '

ALA'D'DIN.

Trite, very trite. Of him it might be said
His fancies are yet staler than his bread.
But come, Hallaj, and I'll make clear
The matter which has brought me here.
It seems that you have heard from him
Of the jeweller's eccentric whim ? [HALLAJ *nods assent.*

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

Well, Ibn-hassim cannot read,
But—mark you!—like a vain old man
He is very proud indeed
Because his daughter can ;
Now Silvermoon——

HALLAJ.

I know, I know—

Will read the rhymes.

ALA'D'DIN.

Exactly so.

What will you charge to write my verse?

HALLAJ.

Two silver pieces.

ALA'D'DIN.

Two? Say one,

And, should I win, you take my purse?

HALLAJ.

That's a clean bargain. Done!

NEJRIHAL (*beating his breast*).

Oh, I'm stuck fast! I cannot reach that rhyme.

ALA'D'DIN (*gesticulating*).

Shall it be light? or passionate? or sublime?

HALLAJ.

Three pieces now. The seven shall come in time!

ALA'D'DIN (*testily*).

Hallaj, I cannot possibly compose
With a creature near me pulling such a face
And fingering out his decimated prose.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ (*very politely*).

Where would you like to sit ?

ALA'D'DIN.

In some soft place.

You have no cushions here. Why, what a man . . .

You live like any Christian.

HALLAJ.

Sit you here.

ALA'D'DIN.

Eh ? that were better ! Thank you . . . the divan.

And oh, Hallaj, if other folk appear,

Keep them away from me. You cannot guess

How sensitive my brain is, how refined—

A vulgar phrase can give me keen distress,

A foolish face upsets me for a week. [*Eyeing NEJRIHAL.*

HALLAJ.

Dear me, dear me !

ALA'D'DIN.

Now I'm beginning. Mind !

[*The bells are sounded again to the right, with a
frightful din.*

HALLAJ.

Another visitor—good. Who is it ? Speak !

[*SULIMAN comes rushing in, brandishing a large pair
of scissors. He is fat and has a round black
beard. Odds and ends pertaining to his profes-
sion are stuck here and there in his costume.
He is much excited.*

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

SULIMAN (*rapidly*).

Oh Hallaj, have you heard? the old Jeweller? Well,
When the crier brought word to the street where I dwell,
I was off like a bird or a fiend out of Hell,
For the whole town is stirred by the story they tell!
She's a maiden for kings, a most marvellous prize—
Why, the worth of her rings you could hardly surmise,
For the gems that she brings are of such a great size . . .

HALLAJ (*good-humouredly*).

Don't brandish those things or you'll put out my eyes!

SULIMAN.

But it's all like a trance! I am so full of joy
That I feel I could dance as I did when a boy.
Come, grapple your chance—for I'll give you employ,
And I'll pay in advance though it be for a toy.
If I win her I swear, as I'm speaking to men,
That I'll never cut hair in my lifetime again!
Let me see, I'll prepare you my poem, and then
What I shall declare you shall write with your pen.

VOICE (*approaching rapidly down the street*).

You villain, come out! Is it here that you hide?
Hallaj, is the barber Suliman inside?

SULIMAN (*in consternation*).

By Allah, Hallaj, when the crier appeared
I suppose I had only cut half of his beard!

[*Enter GULEESH, a small insignificant man. He is much agitated. His beard is well trimmed on one side, but absurdly ragged on the other, and a coloured napkin is still tied round his neck.*]

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

Guleesh, you are welcome.

GULEESH.

But why do you smile ?

HALLAJ.

For a pleasure denied me a very long while.

GULEESH (*exploding*).

'There he is ! By the grave of your fathers, you knave,
'This trick is the maddest that ever I heard.

I am a man with a good reputation to save

And you've made me look simply absurd.

Here I've sped through the street like a figure of fun

Nearly dead with the heat of the blistering sun,

And my beard incomplete ! It was only half done !

If you get near my feet I will teach you to run !

HALLAJ (*restraining him*).

No, no, my good fellow. Come, listen to me.

He is not quite so bad as I think you suppose.

He is making a poem.

GULEESH.

A poem ? what he ?

I will teach him to sing if I get at his nose !

ALA'D'DIN.

You are really unbearable. Clear him away !

NEJRIHAL.

There ! I've lost the one word that I counted upon.

SULIMAN (*soothingly*).

I will cut off the rest for you some other day —

Not now. We are busy. Begone !

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ

(*taking GULEESH by the shoulders and insisting that he shall sit down in the last corner of the room*).

Be calm a moment, friend. I have heard men say
You love a bargain.

GULEESH (*pricking up his ears*).

Well ?

HALLAJ.

Then do as they.

GULEESH.

What ? make a poem ? I ?

HALLAJ.

Just four lines long.

You have heard the news ?

GULEESH.

Of Ibn-hassim ? yes.

He says he will sell his daughter for a song,
But girls are too expensive, I confess,
For my lean purse.

HALLAJ (*cunningly*).

Perhaps you have not heard. . . .

She has a hundred camels.

GULEESH.

On your word ?

HALLAJ.

A hundred at the least, and maybe more.

GULEESH.

What, and you did not tell me this before ?
Away ! I mean to win that girl.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

No doubt,
But then your poem must be written out !

GULEESH (*scratching his beard*).
Written ? dear me.

HALLAJ.

One silver piece. Now come !

GULEESH.

A silver piece ? Too much. Say half the sum.

HALLAJ.

But noble verses must be nobly penned.

GULEESH (*flattered, but grudgingly*).
Well, here it is.

HALLAJ.

Think of her value, friend.

ALA'D'DIN.

At last a little quiet. And now to get
Some new soul-dazzling rhyme for 'Silvermoon.'
Yes . . . let me think . . . I will thread the alphabet !
Boon ? commonplace. Coon, doon, buffoon, ghoon, loon,
June—that might serve . . . loon, macaroon . . . noon,
poon . . .

First fix your rhymes. What though the sense be thin ?
Sound is the soul of song . . .

GULEESH (*from his corner*).

Tut, Ala'd'din,

Don't chatter so. Just when I think I've caught
Some telling phrase, you dash it out of thought.

SULIMAN (*from his corner*).

Silence, Guleesh ! I am getting mine by heart.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

NEJRIHAL (*from his corner*).

If you *must* talk I wish you would go apart.

ALA'D'DIN.

How would that run? 'The nightingale in June
Sings her desire . . .'

NEJRIHAL.

I think I have it now:
'The nightingale adores the Silver Moon . . .'

ALA'D'DIN (*rising*).

What's that you say? No, that I can't allow—
That was *my* thought—the nightingale!

GULEESH.

So far
So good. 'What time the nightingale . . .'

ALA'D'DIN.

You thieves!
You pack of pickbrains—that is what you are!

HALLAJ.

Why, what's amiss? Poets, and lovers, too,
Quarrelling like the birds among the leaves?
In this parched world you poets have always been
Like rain from heaven. Come, this will never do!

SULIMAN (*oblivious of the trouble*).

Hallaj, Guleesh, Nejrihal, Ala'd'din,
Listen! I have made my quatrain.

ALA'D'DIN.

No, no, no,
This matter must be settled first. . . .

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

SULIMAN.

Away!

Put down my verses quickly before they go.
'Ah thornless rose! ah cloudless plenilune!
Even as upon some soundless night in June
No nightingale . . .

ALA'D'DIN.

What! do you mean to say
You're got it too? Now, by my uncle's beard,
This is a rascally world!

SULIMAN.

What? 'nightingale'?
Of course I have got it—such a musical word!

ALA'D'DIN.

I had it first!

NEJRIHAL.

You? It is mine!

GULEESH.

No—mine!

HALLAJ.

Now, all this bickering is of small avail—
Time presses. And, remember, if you will,
Though there be but one silver moon to shine,
In every garden when the warm night is still
She has her singing worshippers.

SULIMAN.

Well said!

There speaks a man of sense: and for my part,
I am willing, since the word is not my own,
To share it round with all of you instead.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

ALA'D'DIN.

No, I refuse. I will not ! I protest !
Why, surely even to you it must be known
That repetition puts an end to art !

SULIMAN.

Well, you, Hallaj—having no interest,
No personal interest in this affair—
Decide between us what were for the best.

NEJRIHAL.

I'll hold to that.

GULEESH.

And I.

ALA'D'DIN.

And I—so there.

HALLAJ.

It is a simple matter. Let your verse
Be gay like noon or softly sad like dusk,
Or pompous like the star-attended dark—
Make it according to your desire, good sirs,
But . . . make it rich ; a paradise of words—
Perfumed with spikenard, cinnamon, myrrh and musk,
And flowered like any royal garden-plot
With crimson lilies or lilies of the vale,
Hyacinth and rose. Put in the names of birds,
Flamingoes, peacocks, parrots, the dove, the lark,
The popinjay—all that you will, but not,
No, not for love's sake, not the nightingale !

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

ALA'D'DIN.

What, none of us? Well, it is hard on me . . .
But . . . as you will.

SULIMAN.

Then, do we all agree—
No nightingales? Good, now! So let it be.
[*They settle down again to composition.*]

HALLAJ.

One, two, three, four, five.
Heigho,
Behold the most unlucky man alive!
For I've heard it said by commercial men
That five is only the half of ten,
And I cannot imagine how to contrive
That *they* should give me the other five.

[*Addressing the audience:*

O Light of my Soul, I wonder what you,
If you were here would decide to do?
There is none shall give her a better verse
(If I say what I in my heart believe),
But this want of coin is a cruel curse,
And I fear there is hardly time to thief.
No matter! If I can win her—well!
And if I lose I have yet the sun,
The clouds, and the earth whereon we dwell,
And flowers and poems and laughter . . .

SULIMAN (*like the report of a cannon*).

Done!

Quickly, Hallaj! Out with your pen and scroll!
The lines are like a torrent, mad to be gone,

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

And snarling at the cage-bars of my soul.
Quick! Let us quench them!

HALLAJ.

Ready! Steady! On!

SULIMAN.

‘Lo, with sharp wit my verses will I prune
With such nice art ’—no, it had better be
‘With such *keen* art, that, like a rose-festoon
Hung round her name . . .’

NEJRIHAL (*hurrying up*).

Excellent! Write for me
Swiftly these lines, Hallaj. What was the rhyme?
‘As Jacob when he woke from sleep at noon . . .’

SULIMAN.

‘Hung round her name, they shall let through their
leaves . . .’

HALLAJ.

I cannot write with both hands. Give me time.

GULEESH (*running up*).

‘Like rare silk spun within the poor cocoon . . .
These ten . . .’

ALA'D'DIN (*brushing them aside*).

Don't listen to a pack of thieves!
Come now. Write out . . .

SULIMAN.

I said, ‘Let through their leaves . . .’

ALA'D'DIN (*disregarding him*).

‘As when some flute-girl pipes too suave a tune . . .’

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

GULEESH.

‘Like rare silk spun within the poor cocoon.’

NEJRIHAL.

‘Held fast the Angel, crying, “A boon ! a boon !”’

SULIMAN.

‘The sparkling radiance of my Silvermoon.’

HALLAJ (*laughing*).

Stand off ! More room ! You are making me perspire

With such a furnace of the heavenly fire.

One at a time, dear fellows, one at a time !

You were the first, Suliman ; say me your rhyme.

SULIMAN.

‘Lo, by sharp wit my stanza will I prune

With such *deft* art, that, like a rose-festoon

Which hangs about her name, through every line

Shall burn the radiance of my Silvermoon.’

HALLAJ.

Charming and most adroit ! Would it were mine !

ALA'D'DIN.

Charming, you say ? Adroit ? Allah forbid !

I thought it clumsy . . .

SULIMAN (*seizing him by an ear*).

Did you ?

ALA'D'DIN.

Let me go !

HALLAJ.

Now, Nejrihal, I am ready. Lift up the lid.

What spicy cake of words have you to show ?

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

NEJRIHAL.

'As Jacob when he woke from sleep at noon
Held fast the Angel, crying "A boon, a boon!"
I will not loose the Angel of sweet rhyme,
Until he bless me with my Silvermoon.'

HALLAJ.

Delightful—very.

ALA'D'DIN.

Nejrihal, my friend,
One word of counsel. If you want to climb
Into her favour, see that you change the end.

HALLAJ.

Guleesh, come forward. Count me out your verse.

GULEESH.

'Like rare silk spun within the poor cocoon,
The ten I pay shall spin a thousand soon!
Ten silver coins! A hundred such were scarce
Too liberal pay for one such Silver Moon!'

HALLAJ.

Truly, with such a regal choice of wines,
Poor Silvermoon will scarce know which to drink!

ALA'D'DIN.

There is too much talk of money in his lines.

HALLAJ.

You are very hard to please.

ALA'D'DIN.

You see, *I* think.
Neither by sound alone nor sense alone
Do I judge verse.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

Then let us hear your own.

ALA'D'DIN.

Well . . . you insist. But understand me, pray,
I count this a mere sketch, a rough design . . .
All genuine first-rate poets of our day
Take quite a week to squeeze out every line.
Thank you. Ahem. Well, these are the lines I made.
‘ As when some flute-girl pipes too suave a tune,
The soul, oppressed with joy, is like to swoon,
So ere she speak I wait in happy dread
To hear the golden voice of Silvermoon.’

NEJRIHAL.

A fancy like a mouse—your mind the cat !

SULIMAN.

Fine as a razor’s back !

GULEESH.

So strong—like silk !

HALLAJ.

Quite as intoxicating as . . .

ALA'D'DIN (*breathlessly*).

As what ?

HALLAJ.

Oh, as a bowl of . . . what shall I say ? . . . of milk !

ALA'D'DIN.

Milk ? But I never heard it held before . . .

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

SULIMAN (*gravely*).

Let us not mar the vague dusk of your verse
By lighting lamps of common speech. No more.
Besides there is not much time. I must be gone
To fetch my coins.

GULEESH.

And I. Quickly—disperse !

NEJRIHAL.

Farewell, Hallaj. We shall be back anon.

[*They all go out, ALA'D'DIN very perplexed.*]

HALLAJ.

I will light the lamps . . . Ab, no.

When the soft night falls on a day of heat

The pulse of a passionate heart beats low,

And even sorrow is well-nigh sweet.

It were wiser to leave them so.

But away with your dreams, Hallaj ! Bestir,

And make your poor room ready for her.

How near each other are heaven and hell—

A handful of gold divides them ! Well,

I hope, whichever of these may win

It will not be that coxcomb Ala'd'din ;

Nor yet Guleesh, for they say the lives

Of camels are better than his poor wives' ;

And Nejrihal, though he bakes bread well,

Is a bit of a booby, truth to tell,

And I hate to picture, if he should win,

My Silvermoon with a rolling pin !

No, no,

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

Since I myself can attain her not,
May she come to the good Suliman's lot.

[*The curtain to the left is drawn a little aside. A
face appears, then a body, then NEJRIHAL walks
on tip-toe across the room.*

NEJRIHAL.

Hallaj !

HALLAJ.

Who is it ? To what do I owe
A second visit, my friend ?

NEJRIHAL.

Speak low.

Is there any other beside you ?

HALLAJ.

No.

I will light the lanterns to prove it . . . so.

NEJRIHAL.

Let me tell you quickly. I mean to win,
But I must confess that I do begin
'To feel that my lines are a little thin
When set by the verses of Ala'd'din.
He is such a poet, you see, but I . . .
Well, briefly, a poem is not a pie.
You can give my hope an extended lease
With a stroke of your pen. For a slight increase,
Will you turn his beautiful swans—to geese ?

HALLAJ (*taking up ALA'D'DIN's poem*).

Let me see them. Yes—for a silver piece !

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

NEJRIHAL.

Why, then, I have won ! You shall have your pay . . .
And a junket, too, on the marriage-day !

[He steals out cautiously. Just as he disappears a face is seen peering round the curtain to the right. Then SULIMAN comes tip-toeing up to HALLAJ.]

SULIMAN (*in a stage whisper*).

Hallaj !

HALLAJ (*turning*).

Who is it ? Suliman ?

SULIMAN.

Yes.

Hallaj, I am certain to fail unless
You will help in a scheme for my success.
Let me tell you . . .

HALLAJ.

No matter. I think I can guess.

SULIMAN.

Well, before I explain, let me say at the start
That old Ibn-hassim cares little for art.
It is money he loves, and I fear for my part
That verse of Guleesh will go straight to his heart.
Now I pray you to lighten my pocket of this

[Giving him a coin.]

And then to abolish my difficulties
By leaving *my* verse for her just as it is,
And . . .

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

I quite understand.

SULIMAN.

Making rubbish of his!

[SULIMAN chuckles as he creeps stealthily out of the room.
A moment after he is gone the face of GULEESH
appears round the curtain to the right and simul-
taneously the face of ALA'D'DIN round that to the
left.

ALA'D'DIN.

Hallaj!

GULEESH.

Hallaj!

ALA'D'DIN.

Who is there?

GULEESH.

What, you?

I come with a plea that is pressing.

ALA'D'DIN.

So?

But mine, as it happens, is urgent, too.

GULEESH.

Will you please to withdraw?

ALA'D'DIN.

Will you kindly go?

GULEESH.

Alas, but that I can hardly do.

ALA'D'DIN.

And with deep regret I must answer, No.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

Why then, come hither and hear me out,
For a notable jest has occurred to me.
You both are resolved to win, no doubt?
But never could one man fight with three.
Now what were a silver coin from each
If I, by twisting a phrase or word,
Should alter your rivals' elegant speech
To the sorriest trash that you ever heard?
I can do it—see—with a flourish here,
With a line or the merest hyphen there,
And surely the price is not too dear
For the gain of a girl so fair?

ALA'D'DIN (*after a moment*).

By the beard of my cousin, you have more wit
Than I thought, Hallaj! I agree to it.

[*He gives HALLAJ a coin.*]

GULEESH (*a little dubiously*).

And I,—though I fear there is just a touch
Of the fool within me to risk so much.

[*He gives HALLAJ a coin.*]

ALA'D'DIN (*going out*).

Oh, Nejrihal, when I see your face
I shall laugh till the ribs of my body crack! [*Exit left.*]

GULEESH (*going out slowly*).

And though I may lose her, in either case,
You rogue, Suliman, I'll pay you back!

HALLAJ (*rapidly*).

One, two, three, four,
Five, six, seven, eight,

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

Nine !

Just one piece more,

And oh, happy fate,

She is mine, mine, mine.

[Hurrying to the outlet on the right.]

Guleesh, turn back ! I must confess to you

That you have never driven a bargain worse.

GULEESH (*returning, furious*).

You rascal, then ! Pocketing my silver, too.

HALLAJ.

He who makes perfume readily makes verse.

Ala'd'din is a poet. I am afraid

Your quatrain hits the target somewhat low.

GULEESH.

Give me back, then, the monies that I have paid !

HALLAJ.

Guleesh, Guleesh, are you so dull ? No, no,—

Do they not say it is the final sprint

'That wins a race ? Of course, do what you please . . .

But . . . for one more coin from the Sultan's mint . . .

GULEESH.

You will serve Ala'd'din as you served these ?

You swear it ?

HALLAJ.

Yes, I swear it . . . by your beard !

See, 'tis already done.

GULEESH.

What, with one word ?

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

Wait, wait, Guleesh, till Silvermoon shall come.
Then you shall see.

GULEESH.

It is so large a sum.

HALLAJ (*indifferently*).

Well, as you will. I know you are money-wise,
But think, my friend, what wealth comes with the prize!
You waver? You refuse? Then be it so.
I hear a noise of bells. You have lost her!

GULEESH (*with an effort, giving another coin*).

No!

HALLAJ.

Ten! Ten, at last!

GULEESH.

I do not understand . . .

Ten what?

HALLAJ.

Why . . . blessings on your princely hand.

[*Going to the curtain right, and looking out.*

See how the blue unhappy dusk departs!
I feel the moonrise. O, if the world of men
Might but remain forever half so sweet
And we with youth and love kindling our hearts,
Life were a poem, so beautiful, so complete,
That every poet might put down his pen!

GULEESH.

You speak as though *you* thought to win her.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

HALLAJ.

Yes,

I am very much the dreamer, I confess,
But life is what we make it, and in truth
'Tis not worth having when we forget our youth.
But listen! Do you not hear a noise of feet,
And of the bells upon her palanquin
Coming toward us down the little street
[*The suitors enter.*
And here her poet-lovers. Welcome in.

NEJRIHAL (*excitedly*).

Near by the mosque, Hallaj, we saw her pass!

SULIMAN.

She is lovelier than an almond-tree in bloom!

ALA'D'DIN.

Prithee, Hallaj, have you no looking-glass?

HALLAJ.

No, none. Bestir yourselves now. Give her room!

[*Two black slaves enter, pull back the curtains on the right, and stand on either side of it.*

IBN-HASSIM *enters slowly*. *He is old and dignified, with a face so fine that it gives the lie at once to SULIMAN's fear that 'it is money he loves.'* *He is followed by a palanquin, richly hung with green and crimson silks, and borne by two tall slaves. They set it down just outside the entrance. SILVER-MOON rises out of her cushions, tall, dark, and full-formed. She is dressed in black and silver, and bears a diamond moon on her brow. Two more slaves bring up the rear, carrying wooden caskets of*

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

indescribable beauty. IBN-HASSIM takes SILVERMOON by the hand and leads her to the divan, where they sit down. The slaves stand in a row behind them.

IBN-HASSIM.

Citizens of our blue-domed Ispahan,
I need not much detain you. What I have said
You have all heard. I am an old, grey man,
Now grown desirous that my child should wed
Before my years are over. Should you ask
Wherefore I sell my daughter for a song,
In place of setting you some soldier's task
To prove your worth, my answer is not long.
If a man love not poetry, the bloom
And fragrance of all life, nor have no shame,
I count him so unnatural from the womb,
So brutish, that he is but man in name!
Thus, too, I know that he whose heart has bowed
To beauty, howsoever else he errs,
Will prove more tender than the swinish crowd,
More musically-minded. Therefore, sirs,
Each in due turn advance. Let us behold
Which of you stands most excellent in verse.
He shall be dowered with beauty and with gold.

HALLAJ (*to SILVERMOON, giving her the scrolls*).
Though they be written by an unworthy pen,
O Moon of April, deign to look on these.

SILVERMOON (*loving at first sight*).
You are Hallaj, the Prince of Writers, then?

HALLAJ.

Prince? Yes, if now my penmanship shall please.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

SILVERMOON.

The scroll I take bears at its foot the name
Of Nejrihal.

NEJRIHAL.

If it please you, I am the same.
The verses are a trifle thin, I fear,
But 'first-rate' poets . . .

IBN-HASSIM.

Silence! We wait to hear.

SILVERMOON (*reading*).

'If you but wed with me, bright Silvermoon . . .'

NEJRIHAL.

What? but I never made . . .

IBN-HASSIM.

Be silent, sir!

SILVERMOON.

'If you but wed with me, bright Silvermoon,
Think how the whole year through from June to June,
You shall eat raisins, candy and sugar-cakes,
And lick the honey from my cooking-spoon!'

[*Turning to IBN-HASSIM, with a smile.*

My lord, 'tis clear, however well he bakes,
Here is no poet!

NEJRIHAL.

But . . . but . . . but I swear
I never made a word of what is there.
Hallaj, you are a scoundrel! Allah forbid
That I should make a verse like that!

ALA'D'DIN and GULEESH.

You did!

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

NEJRIHAL.

Sir, I protest. Their joke has gone too far.
These verses are not mine !

ALA'D'DIN and GULEESH.

Oh, yes, they are !

NEJRIHAL.

Am I enchanted ? What ? I am most perplexed.
I am sure I never made them.

IBN-HASSIM.

Come ! The next !

SILVERMOON.

Suliman is the name that we descry
Upon this manuscript. Which is he ?

SULIMAN.

I !

SILVERMOON (*reading*).

‘If thou accept . . .’

SULIMAN.

No, no . . . ‘Lo, by sharp wit . . .’

IBN-HASSIM.

Not a word more ! Daughter, proceed with it.

SILVERMOON (*reading*).

‘If thou accept my verse, O Silvermoon,
I’ll hang about thee like a rose-festoon.

Behold, my heart is like a lamp new-lit,
My corporal shape,—well, like a kind baboon !’

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

SULIMAN (*breaking from the others*).
Where is Hallaj? I'll cut your throat next time
I get at you, for penning such a rhyme!
I'll whip you into lather!

HALLAJ (*whispering*).

Just a word.

SULIMAN.

What? well—why, that's the merriest quip I've heard!

IBN-HASSIM.

'Tis very plain these babblers cannot win.
Read me the others. Come now.

SILVERMOON.

Ala'd'din.

ALA'D'DIN.

Permit me to suggest that you should read
My poor lame verses with a careful heed
To their entire effect. To make the part
Outshine the whole,—that is a *crime* in art.

GULESH.

Rare, rare, oh rare! He'll find he spoke too soon!

SILVERMOON (*reading*).

'I am no haggling dwarf, O Silvermoon . . .'

ALA'D'DIN.

'No haggling dwarf . . .?'

IBN-HASSIM (*furiously, to a slave boy*).

Go you and hold his tongue!

SILVERMOON (*reading*).

'No pastry-cook, no boisterous, black buffoon.

I am so finely-tempered, so high-strung,

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

That, having made this verse for you, I swoon !'

[To IBN-HASSIM.

Bid me not marry with such a thing as this—

This toyman ! One might *kill* him with a kiss !

There is but one more scroll. 'Guleesh.'

IBN-HASSIM.

To you,

Good sir, it seems the poet's prize is due,

For since it could not possibly be worse

Than these, there is no cause to read your verse.

Take her . . .

SILVERMOON.

But, father, look . . . he squints !

GULEESH.

I pray

That you will not so lightly fling away

One whole hour's labour. No, it were hard indeed.

I take it ill.

SILVERMOON (*glancing down the scroll*).

Most gladly will I read.

[*Reading.*

'Like rare silk spun within the poor cocoon,

The ten I pay shall spin a thousand soon—

And yet—maybe the stuff's not worth the price !

What ! shall I pay all this for Silvermoon ?'

GULEESH.

Give up my coins, Hallaj ! Three pieces !

SULIMAN (*dragging him down*).

Friend,

If you would win them back, take my advice,

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

And sit you down. We have not heard the end
Of this good story.

HALLAJ.

Oh, we have made her cry

SILVERMOON (*through her tears*).

They have all mocked at me.

HALLAJ.

‘They?’ it was I!

IBN-HASSIM.

You, sir? Explain—or else I’ll have your head!

HALLAJ.

Behold, another poem as yet unread.

IBN-HASSIM.

Who made it?

HALLAJ.

I.

IBN-HASSIM.

They told me you were poor.

Have you ten silver pieces then?

HALLAJ.

For sure!

Take them and all I have,—my writing skill,
My strength, my youth, my laughter, what you will,
And what I can,—my wit in word or deed,
And, best, my poet’s joy of beauty!

IBN-HASSIM.

Read!

SILVERMOON.

I will not even hear his rhyme, unless——

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

SULIMAN.

Unless Hallaj himself shall read it ?

SILVERMOON.

Yes.

SULIMAN (*to* IBN-HASSIM).

Sir, may the writer read ?

IBN-HASSIM.

Let it be so.

HALLAJ (*reciting*).

‘Tender and sweet like placid water strewn
With fluttering moonflakes on a night of June,
Are all her thoughts and all her words, for lo !
There in mid-heaven the soul of Silvermoon !’

SILVERMOON.

O it is beautiful !

SULIMAN.

A most charming verse,
Dear fellow, so original, so terse—
Is it not, Ala’d’din ?

ALA’D’DIN.

It is very good.

IBN-HASSIM.

Why, then, my plan has ended as it should
In general harmony. Now, Hallaj, my son,
Receive the gentle prize that you have won,
First by your wit and after by your song !
May you both live melodiously and long.

THE POETASTERS OF ISPAHAN

Hallaj and Silvermoon, poet and wife,
Linked in such love that, when our share of life
Has faded into the dreamy past of man,
Folk shall remember the Lovers of Ispahan.

As for this trumpery, why, it is of earth ;
I did but ask for it to prove your worth,
In sign whereof (give me the cask) behold !
How I transmute your silver into gold.

HALLAJ.

But one word more. Forgive the trick I played
On you, my friends. Let recompense be made.
Guleesh, I give you these (yes, the whole purse !)
For you shall still make money by your verse.
You, Ala'd'din, shall have a satin gown
The twin of which has no man in the town,
And as for Nejrihal, what shall I say ? . . .
Ah yes, 'a junket on the marriage day.'
What for Suliman ? something fair and fine . . .

SULIMAN.

Give me your love.

HALLAJ.

I give it.

SILVERMOON.

And I mine.

1912.

THE APRICOT TREE

To Florence Hine

THE APRICOT TREE

[MESSER NICCOLO NICCOLINI, a wealthy and elderly merchant, lives in a palace at Venice, and it is in his garden that the action of the play occurs. In the centre of the lawn is an apricot tree. To the right is a wall in which is a door of pierced iron-work. To the left is a long stone seat, carved in low relief, on which are coloured cushions. Among them sits MONNA FRANCESCA, a lady of twenty. MESSER NICCOLO, her husband, is walking angrily to and fro before her. A handsome boy named GENTILE is clipping a yew-tree to the right.]

NICCOLO.

What? but I tell you that you shall not go!

FRANCESCA.

Why not?

NICCOLO.

Because—because I'll not be teased!

I am not like some poor husbands that I know
Whom you could clip to any form you pleased
As I were yonder bush. Go to, go to,
And learn that no girl shapes a man like me.

FRANCESCA.

Why did you wed? What is a wife to you?
Men that are younger . . .

THE APRICOT TREE

NICCOLO.

Now, now, let that be.

FRANCESCA.

Were you but younger you would take some pride,
Just as when first you wear a fine new pearl,
In seeing the world covetous of your bride.

NICCOLO.

And you, if you were not so vain a girl,
Were you what I believed . . . But when I speak,
Francesca, put that lute down out of sight—
Out of my sight! I told you that last week.

FRANCESCA.

Niccolo.

NICCOLO.

Well ?

FRANCESCA.

Do let me go to-night.
They have built a stage upon the Doge's barque
And mean to give a pastoral piece in verse—

NICCOLO.

In verse ? not I !

FRANCESCA.

With music in the dark.
They call it 'Leda's Lover.'

NICCOLO.

Worse and worse.

FRANCESCA.

And all the city's going.

THE APRICOT TREE

NICCOLO.

All but we.

FRANCESCA.

Then must I have no gaiety ? What a life !

NICCOLO.

No gaiety ! Do you ever think of me ?
I should count it most unseemly that my wife
Should run the risk of such a throng. I know
Better than you, although you mock my age,
What men are like. Enough ! You shall not go.

[*Warningly.*]

Francesca !

FRANCESCA.

What it means to wed a sage !

NICCOLO.

Rebellion, flat rebellion ! All this year
You have shown yourself a useless, pretty toy,
And cost me who knows what !

[*GENTILE prepares to cut down the apricot tree.*]

Why, why, look here,

Body of Bacchus, what are you up to, boy ?

GENTILE.

Sir, if you want your garden spick and span
Remember that to scythe grass round a tree
Is work to tire the spirit of any man
And much too tedious for a man like me.

NICCOLO.

You idle scamp ! If you but touch that tool
I'll thrash your soul out. What ? you must be mad !

THE APRICOT TREE

GENTILE.

Well, as you wish . . .

FRANCESCA.

Gentile is no fool ;
You know him, Niccolo, for an honest lad.

NICCOLO.

Throw down that axe!

GENTILE.

If you command, but sir . . .

NICCOLO.

My apricot !

GENTILE.

But, master . . .

NICCOLO.

Let it stand.

(*To Francesca*) Perhaps when such an outrage can occur
You will see how soon they all get out of hand
With such a mistress. Cut it down ! And why ?
Simply because you have to take your shears !
No man bore ever such a fate as I
Whose very wife and menials count my years.
(*Whining*) You all conspire to bring me to my grave :
You grudge my breath to me, a poor old man—
All, from yourself down to this bastard knave—
I know you do. Deny it if you can !
Well, I shall soon be gone . . .

FRANCESCA.

The negro men
Are setting out the gondola with flowers.

THE APRICOT TREE

NICCOLO.

What gondola?

FRANCESCA.

Should I give orders, then,
For any but my own—I mean, but ours?

NICCOLO.

You bade them make it ready—you?

FRANCESCA.

I did.

NICCOLO.

Then, by my soul, I have far too much to do
To spend the time in chattering.

FRANCESCA.

God forbid.

NICCOLO (*at the gate*).

But some day you will say ‘I never knew . . .’

FRANCESCA (*imitating*).

‘Not when I had him still, the poor deceased . . .’

NICCOLO.

‘How little I should care for life apart . . .’

FRANCESCA.

‘How good and kind he was.’ Admit at least
I have a memory!

NICCOLO.

No! And what a heart!

[NICCOLO goes out right. FRANCESCA rises and looks
quickly at GENTILE. He stops his work at once.

GENTILE.

Now he is angry.

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

Oh, he enjoys it well.

Gentile !

GENTILE.

Please, Madonna ?

FRANCESCA.

Tell me why

You would not—yesterday.

GENTILE.

And if I tell ?

FRANCESCA.

No, do not tell me ! Guess—how old am I ?

GENTILE.

Nineteen perhaps ? or twenty !

FRANCESCA.

Yes—and you ?

GENTILE.

Why, just the same.

FRANCESCA.

And on this very day

Poor Messer Niccolo is sixty-two.

And oh I think God meant us to be gay

With such a happy sky, such glittering air,—

Not proud or prudent. Is not such a sun

Like a clear sign to puff away all care ?

Some hours there are so beautiful that none

Seems worthy to be living but just those

That have no anger against life at all

But laugh to pluck it like a full-blown rose !

THE APRICOT TREE

GENTILE.

And if the rose be on some other's wall
And not in your own garden ?

FRANCESCA.

 If it be,
Then you must put your ladder up, and climb !

GENTILE

I see.

FRANCESCA.

And take the flower at once.

GENTILE.

I see.

But what if in his garden at that time
Your neighbour should be walking ?

FRANCESCA.

But we know,

Dear silly lad, that he has just gone out ! . . .
I think you fair and comely as men go,
And you—you think me sweet ?

GENTILE.

Beyond a doubt.

FRANCESCA.

Then that's enough. Come ! For the joy of youth
Give me one kiss, and after that—forget.
You are in love—I see it.

GENTILE.

 Yes, in truth,
But only half entangled in the net !

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

How do you mean ?

GENTILE.

You seek to trap me !

FRANCESCA.

Nay.

GENTILE.

That kiss would send me packing !

FRANCESCA.

You believe

That I should tell him ?

GENTILE.

Not perhaps to-day,

But even the loveliest ladies may deceive.

FRANCESCA.

And even a boy of twenty be too cold !

Take up your shears again, and trim your trees

To look like those dull patriarchs of old—

Isaac or Jacob, Ham or whom you please—

For this is plain, there's no man left on earth

But has a mind as wrinkled as a Jew's

And should have been grey-headed at his birth ! . .

[*A brief pause.*]

Methuselah !

GENTILE.

Madonna ?

FRANCESCA.

You refuse ?

GENTILE.

I dare not think you serious.

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

Nay, indeed !

But have you never been so burning glad
That joy was pain ? If I should play or read
I know that I should very soon grow sad.

GENTILE.

Give me a proof.

FRANCESCA.

A proof ? What shall it be ?
Something absurd and happy, something gay !

GENTILE.

I have it !

FRANCESCA.

What ?

GENTILE.

No, I begin to see
That were too dangerous.

FRANCESCA.

Who can tell ? but pray,
Young merchant, what are your terms ?

GENTILE.

I fear too high.

FRANCESCA.

Come, to the bargain !

GENTILE.

See how I play the Jew !
Monna Francesca, give me three proofs, and I
With my own lips will bring the goods to you.

FRANCESCA.

Now for the first, and ask me what you will.

THE APRICOT TREE

GENTILE.

The velvet cap from Messer Niccolo's head!

FRANCESCA.

That may be hard.

GENTILE.

The next is harder still,

But I might ask you what I would, you said—

A tuft from Messer Niccolo's long beard!

FRANCESCA.

Easy! The next?

GENTILE.

The next and last—but nay,

The third would break the bargain as I feared.

FRANCESCA.

Well, if it prove so difficult you must pay

With more than just a little, flying kiss—

We'll time it by the sun we kiss beneath!

What was it?

GENTILE.

Well . . .

FRANCESCA.

I want to hear it.

GENTILE.

This . . .

FRANCESCA.

Gentile, tell me—quick!

GENTILE.

One of his teeth!

FRANCESCA.

Oh, but I love my playmate!

THE APRICOT TREE

GENTILE.

And I too.

FRANCESCA.

Then is all ready?

GENTILE.

No. A last surprise!

Since you dare much I'll dare as much for you

And kiss you three times—here—before his eyes!

FRANCESCA.

Impossible. You cannot.

GENTILE.

Hush! I can.

[NICCOLO *re-enters*.

NICCOLO.

Well, you were wrong. True, they had tricked it out

With fruit and leaves on some fantastic plan,

But when they saw my face, they turned about

And made all clear.

FRANCESCA.

Indeed! What did they say?

NICCOLO.

There,—you have asked. They said the grapes and
flowers

Were set in honour of my natal day,

Not by your whim. Such are these men of ours,—

I gave them each a florin.

FRANCESCA.

That was kind.

THE APRICOT TREE

NICCOLO.

And you, Francesca . . . ?

FRANCESCA.

When you departed, sir,
I set about considering in my mind
All that you said . . .

NICCOLO.

And saw how much you err—
Is that not so? Well, you are half a child,
And I'll forgive you. Shall we take up the chess?

FRANCESCA.

What, chess—to-day? Too solemn and too mild,—
But run, and let me catch you! Yes, oh yes,
Here round the apricot. Begin, begin!
Now! Run away!

[NICCOLO *toddles off to the tree.*
But you must really run!

NICCOLO (*hastening*).

A child, a child!

FRANCESCA.

Why, you will never win—
Look, I have caught your cap!

NICCOLO.

What have you done?
Francesca! Ruined—quite—my velvet hat!
You did that out of malice. Broken, too,—
The plume all broken!

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

And the crown all flat !
You cannot wear it now—a man like you—
Yet it might serve some other, such as this boy—
Gentile.

NICCOLO.

And it made me look so fine !

FRANCESCA (*to GENTILE*).

Good Messer Niccolo desires you joy
And being generous gives you this for sign.
But, Niccolo, I am sorry I did that,
And would not see you angry. Sit you down
And let me soothe you for your tumbled hat.
There now. Look up. So rueful ? What a frown !
Well, but I know that I can cure you still
If you but take my medicine.

NICCOLO.

Get you gone.

FRANCESCA.

My medicine, for I think you must be ill . . .

NICCOLO.

Not ill at all.

FRANCESCA.

I say no more.

NICCOLO.

Say on,—

What is your remedy ?

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

Why it is very old,
And not to be obtained of any *man*
In any perfume shop for all the gold
That lies in Venice or in Turkestan.
They say that it was found at first by Eve,
When she and Adam walked alone on earth,
And that is what, for my part, I believe.

NICCOLO.

But when did *you* obtain it?

FRANCESCA.

At my birth.

NICCOLO.

You never told me that you had it.

FRANCESCA.

Nay,

But you shall try it now. The cure is this:

Take a sweet girl, a garden, a blue day,

Add laughing eyes, and blend them in a kiss!

[*She kisses him and at the same time pulls out a tuft of
his beard and gives the tuft to GENTILE behind her
back.*

NICCOLO.

Oh, oh, Francesca!

FRANCESCA.

What is the matter?

NICCOLO.

Now,

By all the Saints, I'll beat you for that trick,—
Beat you until you're black and blue, I vow!

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

Niccolo, Niccolo, surely you must be sick.
I knew it. Tell me, where is the pain?

NICCOLO.

The pain?

Where should it be but where you tugged my beard—
Here in my jaw?

FRANCESCA.

You are sick, 'tis very plain,
And want the leech. You are worse than I had feared.

NICCOLO.

I say I am not sick.

FRANCESCA.

You cannot tell.

NICCOLO.

My beard—you rent it!

FRANCESCA.

What a charge to make!
I like the beard,—you know I like it well.

NICCOLO.

But do I look so ill?

FRANCESCA.

For mercy's sake,
Gentile, fetch the barber Giambattist——

NICCOLO.

For what, for what?

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

To pull out that bad tooth.
If your face hurts you just at the point I kissed,
It must be that.

NICCOLO.

It might be that, in truth.

FRANCESCA.

Poor Niccolo ! There is not a doubt. But say,
Does it still throb ?

NICCOLO.

Perchance I caught a cold
On that ride home from Padua yesterday.

FRANCESCA.

What *can* we do ?

NICCOLO.

The lot of all the old,
Francesca, is to suffer and endure.
Leave me to bear it.

FRANCESCA.

Never—when my own hand
Could root away the cause !

NICCOLO.

But are you sure ?

FRANCESCA.

Come. Let me see the tooth. You must not stand
Or I shall lack the force to pull it out.
Sit on these cushions. There. A little more . . .
Ah yes, that black one, that is the cause no doubt.

THE APRICOT TREE

Thank you, Gentile . . . [GENTILE *gives her a cord.*

Once behind, before,

Behind again, and soon shall you be well.

Now !

GENTILE.

Messer Niccolo . . .

FRANCESCA.

Look you, he is dumb ;

He cannot answer.

GENTILE.

I have heard folk tell

That apricots will calm the gaping gum

Which like a ewe laments the missing lamb.

Let me climb up and get one. Just a word—

Are you willing that I should ?

FRANCESCA.

He means ‘ I am.’

GENTILE.

Up then, Gentile ! Now you have won the third !

FRANCESCA.

I shall not hurt you. So—with one, two, three—

Out it comes—look, the black sheep of the flock !

GENTILE (*up in the tree*).

Save her. oh save her ! Master, Master, see !

NICCOLO.

Something to soothe me, something to still the shock !

GENTILE.

Monna Francesca—look—she is all on fire.

THE APRICOT TREE

NICCOLO.

Tush, are you mad, boy ?

GENTILE.

Water, water, look !

Dash out the flames. Higher they spring and higher—
They touch her breast !

NICCOLO.

Now, by the Holy Book,
What does this mean ? You see her standing whole.

GENTILE.

No, she is burning like a rose in flame.
Unhand her, Master ! Think, think of your soul !

FRANCESCA.

What *can* it be ? Gentile !

GENTILE.

Oh, for shame,

Get water, water !

FRANCESCA.

What do you think you see ?

NICCOLO.

There's madness in this boy.

GENTILE.

Of course—I know—

It must be this accurst enchanted tree !

NICCOLO.

Enchanted ?

THE APRICOT TREE

GENTILE (*getting down*).

Sir, that apricot must go.

NICCOLO :

What, is it then bewitched ?

GENTILE.

And that was why

You caught me in the act to cut it down.

Where is my axe ? I will root it up or die !

NICCOLO.

No, no ! You simpleton, you country clown,

You have not proved your word.

GENTILE.

I tell you then

That I have climbed that tree for seven days

And seen black devils eating naked men,

A sky all squares, a sun with purple rays,

Girls with no heads, dragons with five or six,

And more, much more. I beg you, prove it, sir,

Prove for yourself its eye-amazing tricks,

Then whip me home to Florence if I err.

You shall see something that astounds belief,—

I'll stake my head upon it,—just as I

Saw that which made me nearly mad with grief,—

Monna Francesca burning. Try, oh try !

Here is my hand . . .

[NICCOLO *begins to get up into the tree.*

Up on that bough ! Again !

So,—you sit perched like some majestic bird.

Now use your eyes.

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

Gentile, what a brain !

GENTILE.

Monna Francesca, thus do I keep my word.

First, for the velvet hat, a little kiss,

For that was easy, but a kiss more soft

'Than the moon gives the peach. [*He kisses her hand.*

NICCOLO (*in the tree*).

Eh, eh ? what's this ?

GENTILE.

Stay just a moment more up there aloft.

FRANCESCA.

That was a kiss of bronze, Gentile. Now

Pay me in silver.

GENTILE.

Yes, for the tuft of hair,

A kiss where your own locks part at the brow.

NICCOLO.

I am coming down !

FRANCESCA.

What do you see then ?

NICCOLO.

Boy,

Your hand, your hand ! This bough's too weak to hold.

GENTILE.

Then, for the tooth, let us put all our joy

Into one long deep splendid kiss of gold !

[*He kisses her mouth.*

THE APRICOT TREE

FRANCESCA.

Look ! He is fallen out !

GENTILE.

Beshrew my heart,—

Master, you are not pained ? What did you see ?

NICCOLO.

You,—were you standing all this time apart ?

FRANCESCA.

Why, yes.

NICCOLO.

Gentile.

GENTILE.

Sir ?

NICCOLO.

Cut down that tree !

THE SUMMIT

THE SUMMIT

[*A terrace of the Phrygian Palace at Iconium. Two brothers enter, AREGASTES and DION. They are young warriors.*]

AREGASTES.

They have given it to her.

DION.

What ?

AREGASTES.

The poison.

DION.

When will she die ?

AREGASTES.

Within this hour, my brother. You are to watch her.

DION.

I ?

She is coming here then ?

AREGASTES.

Yes. The King's word is fulfilled.
She drank the cup unknowing. A strange deed to have
willed—

The death of his own daughter !

THE SUMMIT

DION.

He had some cause, they say.

AREGASTES.

Cause? If the wish to wring from life all that you may
Be crime, she merits death. Dion . . . ah well, no more!
Keep watch here.

DION.

Stay! Brother, I see your spirit is sore.
What troubles you?

AREGASTES.

Why nothing . . . a memory. Let me go.
At noon the five new ships are to be launched, you know,
Down in the bay. They look superb with their blue sails—
Like dragons wing'd and all splendid with burnished scales
Think of it—sixty oars!

DION.

Why do you give the task
Of watching the Princess to me?

AREGASTES.

You must not ask.

DION.

You have some hidden reason.

AREGASTES.

Well—if you will . . .

DION.

What, then?

AREGASTES.

If I should tell you, Dion, you will not tell it again?

THE SUMMIT

DION.

We Phrygians make no vows, but, brother, here's my hand.
Is that enough?

AREGASTES.

Why, yes,—yes, you will understand.
Think me not foolish, Dion: I loved her.

DION.

The Princess?

AREGASTES.

I loved her—once.

DION.

How terrible! But Aregastes...

AREGASTES.

Yes?

DION.

Had the King learned of this, you must have died!

AREGASTES.

I know.

He did not learn, and now my passion is fallen low—
Mere ashes now! Your heart was always cooler than mine,
Mine that takes fire from beauty as other men's from wine,
And where I have loved a score you have hardly loved at all.
Well, if you miss the nectar you also miss the gall!
Love never lasts for long if love be hot as flame,
Like mine, and when it is cool there comes a kind of shame
Or loathing. That you escape, and yet to me you seem
Like one who lets his life rush by him in a dream.
I do not love her now, but still... her death is nigh,
And she is so beautiful I dared not see her die,
Yet could not leave her here unfriended. For most men
Are so obtuse, mere hulks that eat and drink...

THE SUMMIT

DION.

And then

You chose out me? I thank you.

AREGASTES.

Yes, for I know your skill.

You will lead her tenderly to the thought of death.

DION.

I will.

AREGASTES.

Strange, that I care at all how she should die! And yet
Once I had gladly given my heart's blood only to get
One kiss of her curved lips or even to touch her hand,
Or—but all that is gone.

DION.

Your passion was well planned!

A near escape!

AREGASTES.

Indeed. Be sure, I would not kiss
Her mouth now for the whole earth, marvellous though
she is.
I have no mind to perish by poison!

DION.

So it seems

'That 'life' has certain perils that we avoid in 'dreams!'

AREGASTES.

I have never yet refused to kiss a maid, but now
A princess though she be she would find me chaste, I vow!
Well, well, be gentle with her.—Now for the noisy ships!
And may you learn to love!

THE SUMMIT

DION.

But not from poisoned lips !

AREGASTES (*going out*).

Princess !

PRINCESS (*entering*).

Why, Aregastes, must you be going ?

AREGASTES.

Yes.

Look, the ships wait for me.

PRINCESS.

I am sorry, I confess,

For the King is angry with me. He is angry. Could you
stay

I would tell you all, and you could brush his wrath away.

He has such love for you. Do for me what you can.

He bade me wait him here.

AREGASTES.

The King is a fierce man.

What shall I say to him ? He would not listen.

PRINCESS.

Why,

Tell him that all our queens have been proud-willed as I.

He will forgive me then. I wish you might have stayed,

For something makes me feel half-happy, half-afraid—

As if my feet were wing'd. Almost it makes me think

There was magic in that wine they brought for me to drink.

AREGASTES.

Princess . . .

THE SUMMIT

PRINCESS.

You wish to go?

AREGASTES.

I must.

PRINCESS.

Who, then, is this?

Your brother?

AREGASTES.

Yes.

PRINCESS.

He is younger, but how like you he is!

AREGASTES.

Like me? Not so, Princess, or only, if at all,
In form and face. Our souls—but, hark! I hear them call.
Wiser is he than I, as you shall learn, but not
So fiery, so impetuous.

PRINCESS.

Yes, you were ever hot.

AREGASTES.

Princess! Why do you say that? Tell me!

PRINCESS.

I will not tell—

Not now. Perhaps one day . . . I am not blind.

AREGASTES.

Farewell.

[*The PRINCESS reveals no change as AREGASTES departs. She walks over to the terrace, which is shadowed by tawny vans painted with cobalt and gold. There she stands for a moment, looking out.*]

THE SUMMIT

PRINCESS.

What is your name ?

DION.

My name is Dion.

PRINCESS.

A fair name.

I see you are a soldier. Life is to you a game,—
No more than that ! You soldiers !

DION.

No, indeed, Princess,

Life is great romance.

PRINCESS.

Truly you mean it ?

DION.

Yes,

With my whole being I say it.

PRINCESS.

Oh, how I wish I too

Could feel that life had somewhat worth suffering for, like
you,

For if you live in earnest it means you have some goal
That you believe could bring contentment to your soul,
And that means you are ready to suffer for it. I
Shall never weep again. There is nothing worth a sigh . . .
But tell me what it is that *you* seek ?

DION.

Only this,—

One day, one hour, one moment of such transcendent bliss
That my soul poised in air, dizzy with joy, shall cry,
'I can no more !'

THE SUMMIT.

PRINCESS.
And then ?

DION.
Then I would gladly die.

PRINCESS.
Your brother does not understand your nature.

DION.
No,
He thinks that I am prudent.

PRINCESS.
Yes, it is often so.
But tell me, Dion, that one moment,—in what way
Do you expect to find it ?

DION.
Alas ! I cannot say :
But this I know, that when I stand upon the peak
Of life my soul will know it.

PRINCESS.
And so you seek and seek
Some rapture that shall rid your spirit of all desire . . .

DION.
He who has found the highest, how could he look for higher ?

PRINCESS.
That is the way with most men, nevertheless.

DION.
It is,
But from the senses only none can attain to bliss,
Because we are spirits and deathless.

THE SUMMIT

PRINCESS.

Dion, what is the soul ?

DION.

That which desires the perfect, which is both whip and goal.

PRINCESS.

That which desires the perfect ?

DION.

That which drives us on
Forever and ever from shape to shape till all be gone,
Or else till in one form of beauty the soul gain
All it has thirsted after.

PRINCESS.

And seemed to have sought in vain !

O Dion, would I had known that you were—you were thus,
Throughout these lonely months. Fate has been harsh with
us.

What have I said ? Ah me, somehow to-night I seem
Awakening out of life as if life were a dream,
And all my spirit is glowing. I know beyond all doubt
That I can trust your soul and fearlessly speak out.
Tell me of beauty, Dion ! If all fair forms decay
How shall the soul find rest in what will vanish away ?

DION.

This I believe, that when life is all over, nought
Remains within the soul but what the senses brought.
The soul then, like a traveller seeking his native clime,
Bears to eternity the treasure found in time.

PRINCESS.

Where is the utmost beauty ? For I, I will seek it too !

THE SUMMIT.

DION.

Alas, alas ! Princess, I should ask that—of you.

[*A brief pause.*]

PRINCESS.

I feel a beautiful danger gathering round us here.

DION.

Silently, all unknowing, our spirits have come so near
That ere you speak I know that which you feel, and you
Surely can hear my soul singing——

PRINCESS.

I do, I do !

DION.

I hear my own voice faintly. Your beauty floods my sense
With waves on waves of joy unutterably intense.
I am within mine eyes for still I see your face,
Yet I have overwhelmed my body. I am in space.
I am a light, a glory. I am music. I am the whole—
Earth and the stars, and yes, yes, I am within your soul !

PRINCESS.

Our lives have touched their summit. What should it matter
at all

Though the world were ended now, though the roof of
heaven should fall ?

O that this hour might last for ever and ever, this
One hour wherein our souls drown in the deeps of bliss !

DION.

As rays of a thousand stars caught in a single sphere
The centre of all the beauty in the Universe is here.

THE SUMMIT.

PRINCESS.

I have come right up to God. I am lost in light. Ah me, God is a Splendour of Love. I am blind! I cannot see!

DION.

I know my hour, my hour of ecstasy!

PRINCESS.

And I!

DION.

Let me but kiss you once, O Beautiful, and then die.

[DION approaches the PRINCESS. *With her eyes closed she kisses him.*

PRINCESS.

I am faint. I hear my heart . . . Oh, Death! Dion, I come!

[*She dies. DION moves back a few paces and stands marvelling at her beauty. After a little while AREGASTES enters, softly and carrying a torch.*

AREGASTES.

How well they looked, all five! They were worth twice the sum.

All silent! She is dead. How wonderful she is!

I see you too are awed at such an hour as this.

Can you not feel for me who loved her—once? Alas,

Brother! Alas, I weep. Such beauty should not pass.

How did she die? What said? Ah brother, woe is me!

Her death has hurt my heart more than I thought could be.

And when her soul was darkening under that slow eclipse

How did you smooth her way? How?

DION.

I have kissed her lips.

THE SUMMIT

AREGASTES.

Dion! Oh, you were mad! You have flung your life
away!

Was she so beautiful? Brother!

DION.

I do not say
That she is beautiful: for me she is beauty.

AREGASTES.

Lo,
You are growing faint already. Come with me, swiftly!

DION.

No.

AREGASTES.

What! Are you dreaming? Come!

DION.

I have no will to live.
I have seen the inmost flame. Life has no more to give.
I am supremely happy. Be still, be still.

AREGASTES.

But think,—
Our mother,—what will she say?

DION.

My life begins to sink.
O queenly marvellous face! Brother, brother, I bear
Into Eternity the splendour that was there. [*A silence.*]

AREGASTES.

Yes, he is dead. How strange, how dark a spirit was his!
And I? I am just a child . . . I wonder what love is.

1912

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

To O. A.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

*'Lovers unto lovers grow
Like the flowers to the sun;
Lovers unto lovers run
Quicker than a wind can blow.
Loving is the only living;
Every heart was made for giving;
Hearts ungiven end in woe,
Hearts ungiven end in woe.'*

HERBERT FARJEON.

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY :

A TROUBADOUR . . .	Teller of the story.
AUCASSIN.	
NICOLETTE.	
COUNT GARIN DE BEUCAIRE	Father of Aucassin.
ROBERT AND RUFUS . .	Two Shepherds.
THE KING OF CARTHAGE .	Father of Nicolette.
A SERGEANT.	
ROGER	Companion to the Sergeant.
FIVE SARACENS.	
FOUR SERVING-MEN . .	In the employ of Count Garin.
TWO KNIGHTS.	
TWO LADIES.	

Mutes:—Ladies, knights, men-at-arms, Carthaginians, the Count Bougars de Valence.

Scenes:—At Beaucaire, in a forest, on a shore, at the Carthaginian Palace.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE.

[*A pleasant curtain shuts in the stage. In front of it a platform spreads, and on to this walks the TROUBADOUR, carrying a lute. Having come to the centre, he turns to the audience and speaks to them the following ballade:—*]

Ladies and lords and courteous gentle-folk,
I am your servant. Here I bring my play,
Wherein we tell how joyfully love woke
In boy and girl one blue and blossoming May;
For what though centuries have swept away?
These two live on because in life they wrought
The perfect love which all the world has sought.

The world, I see, has donned a darker cloak,
A soberer gown, and wears a look less gay
Than in the bannered courts where last I spoke;
But though all else in human life decay,
One dream there is that now, as in my day,
I think men cannot wholly put from thought—
The perfect love which all the world has sought.

You are the living fire, we the poor smoke
Of what once burned like you; not only they,
The motley phantoms that my rhymes evoke,
But I, the rhymer. Give us Yea or Nay,
Just as you will, yet scorn us not, I pray,
For here I bring you what to me Love brought,
The perfect love which all the world has sought.

[*The TROUBADOUR steps to one side, the curtain rises, and the scene shows a corner of Beaucaire as it may have been in the Middle Ages. To the left of the audience rises a castle with an*

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

ivy-grown turret on a mound which is pied with flowers. To the right of the audience rises the city itself, and in the foreground a solid prison pierced only with a grille. Behind the prison appear the roofs and walls of Beaucaire. The middle of the stage represents a green meadow. The whole scene is on the scale of an elaborate toy.

The back-cloth, painted with a fine disregard for perspective, shows many marvels. In the foreground, somewhat in the manner of Simone Martini, ten thousand knights and men-at-arms of Beaucaire contend with ten thousand knights and men-at-arms of Valence between the legs of two vast, curvetting, foam-white chargers which bear the rival counts. Directly on top of these,—on the second storey of the picture,—is a dark forest which breaks abruptly into a sunny clearing where shepherds and shepherdesses neglectfully disport themselves among gambolling lambs and capering goats outside a bower constructed of flowery branches. These are in the middle and to the right, but to the left at a little distance is a band of greedy Saracens grouped round the camp-fire and throwing double-sixes at dice. Above comes the continuation of the forest, then golden sands with unicorns and hippopotami at play, and lastly, dotted with ships and turtles, a sea that stretches into a soft transparent sky. On the top corner of this picture, to the left, are the arms of Valence, to the right the arms of Beaucaire.*

In front of the prison lies AUCASSIN. Before him stands his father, the COUNT GARIN.]

GARIN.

Love? What is love? Get sword and shield,

Mount horse, and ride amongst our men !

If you but show your crest afield

Each man of ours will count for ten.

Now up and fight !

Bah ! What is love to make make men weep ?

The Count Bougars has sworn an oath

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Not, till this war be won, to sleep,
And here you loll in love-lorn sloth,—
A manly sight!
Look you,—Beaucaire, this home of ours,
To-morrow may be charred with flame,
And flaunt from half a hundred towers
Their damnèd flags. Get up for shame,
And you a knight!

AUCASSIN.

Let the Count shear away this head—
I reck not. I am too sad for fear.
Much rather would I join the dead
Than live without my love, my dear,
My fair sweet friend.

GARIN.

Still hungering, then, for Nicolette!

AUCASSIN.

For Nicolette!

GARIN.

It must not be.
What boyish whim has made you set
Your heart on such a thing as she?
Come, make an end.
She must have been a score of men's—

AUCASSIN.

You lie!

GARIN.

So there I prick you! How,—
She, captured from the Saracens
And yet a virgin?

[*Tucket without.*

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Hark you now,
The trumpet calls !
On with your armour !

AUCASSIN.

Not before
You swear to let me see her face,
If but one moment and no more,
One moment in some quiet place
Within these walls.
Father . . .

GARIN.

You cannot wed her, boy.

AUCASSIN.

Then will I never fight ! Enough !

GARIN.

What ! will you let the Count destroy
Our township for a fit of love ?

You serve me ill ! [*Trumpet without.*]

AUCASSIN.

Do you not hear ? The trumpets sound !

GARIN.

Give me your help, and win the day,—
I own your courage has no bound.

AUCASSIN.

No, nor my love ; but you must pay
To win my skill.

GARIN.

Out on you ! Love has made you weak.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

Weak? Do you beg a weakling's aid?

GARIN.

No, no, I take that in.

AUCASSIN.

Then speak,—

Will you accept the terms I made?

GARIN (*giving his hand*).

There then, I will!

AUCASSIN (*springing up*).

My hauberk! My sword! I will deal to him yet
Such a blow on the helm that the Count shall regret
There was love in my heart at the hour when we met.
You have sworn. To the battle! Beaucaire! Nicolette!
[He goes out quickly, right.]

GARIN.

Now, that was a fortunate cast of the dice,
For in truth he believes I shall pay him the price!
If the stir of the battle should fail to suffice,
I will clap her in prison. A cunning device!

[The curtain comes down. On to the platform in front of it march quickly from the left the COUNT BOUGARS DE VALENCE with ten [thousand] men-at-arms. They are balanceed on the right by the entry of AUCASSIN, COUNT GARIN, and ten [thousand] men-at-arms of Beaucaire. From each army a trumpeter advances. He sounds an ulurum on his long trumpet. The COUNT BOUGARS throws down his gage. AUCASSIN takes it up. They fight. The armies fall upon one another with cries of 'Beaucaire' and 'Valence,' and the knights are driven or drive others from the field, until none is left but AUCASSIN and the COUNT BOUGARS.]

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

After a little while, AUCASSIN forces the COUNT to kneel, captures him, and leads him off, right, to the town of Beaucaire.

The curtain rises. Beaucaire is now in moonlight. On the ivy-grown turret to the left NICOLETTE is looking out.]

NICOLETTE.

O fair sweet friend, my beautiful lover,
What has befallen you? Is it all over?
Shall we not meet any more till the end?
Life is a long time, fair sweet friend.

Shield him, Mother! O Mary Mother,
Surely you know how we love one another?
And who but lovers fulfil the plan
Meant by the Giver of life to man?

Oh, there in the greenwood, over the city,
Sad sweet nightingale, have you no pity?
I pray you pity me! Sing no more!
Such beauty hurts when the heart is sore.

[NICOLETTE goes down into the turret. AUCASSIN, COUNT GARIN and two or three soldiers enter, right, and pause beside the prison.]

AUCASSIN.

Now my reward! Although the hour be late
Lead her, well guarded, here. I cannot wait—
I who have waited far too long. My lord,
Why do you stand thus fingering at your sword?

GARIN.

To-morrow, Aucassin. No doubt the child
Is fast asleep.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

What! have I been beguiled?

GARIN.

You judge me oversoon.

AUCASSIN.

To-night, I say,

Or, though you be my father, you shall pay.

GARIN.

Indeed! I do not think it. Would you fight
Unarmed against us all?

AUCASSIN.

I say to-night!

GARIN.

Then I say never! Why, if you think, my lad,
I'd stick by such a bond, you must be mad,
Or think me so. The girl's no bride for you—
A captured paynim!

AUCASSIN.

All your murderous crew
Shall never hold *me* back. Out of my way!

GARIN (*to the soldiers*).

Grapple him fast! Now, my dear son, I pray,
Can you upset a stone tower with your hand?

AUCASSIN.

Speak in plain words that all can understand!

GARIN.

Your Nicolette . . .

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

Imprisoned ?

GARIN.

So you see

That no sick boy can win a match with me.

AUCASSIN.

You shut her in a tower ? Poor Nicolette ! . . .
Or have you killed her ? Have you ?

GARIN.

No—not yet.

AUCASSIN.

Not yet ! If you should kill her . . . Oh, the shame
To bear your crest and your perfidious name !

GARIN (*incensed*).

Aucassin !

AUCASSIN.

Well,—Count Garin de Beaucaire ?

GARIN.

Bah ! This is folly. What I did was fair,
Being done that your immortal soul might win
To Paradise. Remember, Aucassin,
Your wench was never christened.

AUCASSIN.

Paradise !

I count the loss of that a bargain-price
To pay for beauty and the great joy of youth !
Nay, by the Sacred Heart, out with the truth !
Who come to Paradise ? The sick, the old,
The hideous, and the mild and mealy souled ;

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Lepers, and coughing hypocrites that wheeze
And cringe around the altars on their knees ;
Tun-bellied priests and foul, flat-bosomed hags,
And aches and groans and sores, crutches and rags,
And ghastly saints, itching with filth and lice—
I tell you *these* go up to Paradise !
But there, to Hell, go down the strong and fair,
All who love life, the gay, the debonair,
The joyous of the world ! Your very priests
Proclaim that all but their own silent ‘ feasts ’
And all fair songs that drown their dismal bell
Go, with all lovely vanities, to Hell,—
Nay, and if God is love, where can Hell be
But where, like God, love hangs upon a Tree ?

GARIN.

If Heaven should overhear ! Set wide the door,
And bolt him in. You shall blaspheme no more.
You shall do penance. Not till she be slain
Who damns your soul shall you come forth again !

[*The soldiers force AUCASSIN into the prison, the door of which is hardly visible to the audience, and then follow the COUNT, who strides out, right. The TROUBADOUR, who during this episode has become interested, and has advanced almost up to the speakers, now turns and says :—*]

THE TROUBADOUR :

Now is there no man that will help these loving friends ;
but, certes, that is a very grievous case. The young knight
shut in a prison ; the young maid shut in a tower ; and a
double sweetness of youth quite wasted. Nicolette, poor
child, I will throw a thought into your soul. Nicolette,

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Look, Nicolette,
No one is nigh.
Now, if you try,
You shall come to him yet.

If you would meet
Here in your hope ;
Make now a rope
Of your smock and your sheet !

Lose not the hour,
Beautiful maid !
Act unafraid
And fly from the tower !

[*During the second verse NICOLETTE has come to the top of the turret, and as if the plan were her own, has cast down a rope of linen and so climbed free of her prison. The TROUBADOUR withdraws outside the stage.*]

NICOLETTE.

Now I shall come to my lover to-night,
Tremble again to his kiss on my cheek !
But where shall I seek ?
To the left,—by the vineyard ?

TROUBADOUR (*softly*).

Ah, no ! To the right !

NICOLETTE.

If I ran to Beaucaire they would kill me ! Alas,
If I had but a hint ! I believe he is there . . .

TROUBADOUR.

To the town of Beaucaire !

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

I will go by the fields,—there is dew on the grass !

[NICOLETTE *steps daintily across the meadow between turret and prison.* AUCASSIN *looks out from the grille and does not see her until she is quite close.*]

AUCASSIN.

It is no use. I cannot sleep to-night,
For sick imaginings that I see her slain ;
Yet surely she was destined for delight,
And so much beauty was not born in vain ?
[*seeing her as she passes.*
My Nicolette ! My lovely friend, my sweet !

NICOLETTE.

Where are you ?

AUCASSIN.

Powerless, here behind the grille.

NICOLETTE.

Entrapped !

AUCASSIN.

Betrayed, and by a foul deceit.

NICOLETTE.

But have they hurt you ? have they wrought you ill ?

AUCASSIN.

Not in that wise, and yet the worst they could,—
They went to slay my love, my little friend.
What if they find you now ?

NICOLETTE.

And if they should,
It matters nothing. All is at an end.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

Not while we have the darkness and the stars !
If you fly now . . .

NICOLETTE.

It is too late.

AUCASSIN.

Ah no,

Night is not spent.

NICOLETTE.

Could we not smash the bars,
Not if we set our hands together,—so ?
Pull them back hard, while with my utmost might
I push them in.

AUCASSIN.

See, they have cut your hand !

NICOLETTE.

They shook !

AUCASSIN.

No, no. There's nothing now but flight.
Go, while you may ! Go, and to any land,
For I will track you.

NICOLETTE.

Yet a little space,
A few last moments, for the love we bear !

AUCASSIN.

I see the dawn like death upon your face,
And like an angel's aureole round your hair.

NICOLETTE.

Oh, God, how is it love can be so weak ? [*A bell far off.*]

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

Listen,—the earliest monastery bell
That wakes the world. Now, ere they come to seek,
Give me your hands to kiss, and then,—farewell!

NICOLETTE.

Not yet, I pray. Why should we sunder yet?
The very birds are only just awake.
A little time for joy!

AUCASSIN.

Ah, Nicolette,
But if they burn your beauty at the stake!

[NICOLETTE sinks down at the base of the window in despair.
On the other side of the stage two soldiers with lanterns enter.
They examine the turret.]

1ST SOLDIER.

Not a doubt of it, Roger; she has flown, for a fact. Now
what we must find is a clue.

2ND SOLDIER.

A clue, Sergeant? What may you mean by a clue?

1ST SOLDIER.

Come, come, fool Roger, hunt for a clue. And bear this in
mind, boy; it matters not how or where she be killed so
you and I go back to the Count with a dangling head.
A clean-cut head, my lad,—there is nothing like it for
proving your zeal. And if you have wit you will not
cleave your sword, for new blood on a sword will excite
the purse of a king.

2ND SOLDIER.

Why, Sergeant, look you! By the mass, a rope!

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

1ST SOLDIER.

A rope? You ignorant knave! A rope of fine linen, forsooth! Here is no rope, fool Roger, but a most brave clue. Wrought of her smock, poor natural,—hear you that? Now, it means that she climbed from this tower . . .

2ND SOLDIER.

There are footmarks here in the dew.

1ST SOLDIER.

What, footmarks, Roger? No, no. Come, follow me over this meadow. Footmarks, forsooth!

[*They follow the footprints with their lanterns on the way to AUCASSIN'S prison.*]

TROUBADOUR.

Nicolette!

NICOLETTE.

Who is there?

TROUBADOUR.

Nicolette, run away! Run away, I conjure you by Love!

AUCASSIN.

There are lanterns moving toward us!

NICOLETTE.

I will swim the moat!

[*She goes out, right.*]

2ND SOLDIER.

She must be cold, Sergeant, without her clue.

1ST SOLDIER.

Now, you go there by the buttress, and I'll go here by the grille.

2ND SOLDIER.

Have mercy!

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

1ST SOLDIER.

Why, what's amiss? Fool Roger, you will never make a bowman if you leap at shadows. I could swear she is gone to the great Cathedral, looking for sanctuary.

2ND SOLDIER.

Who is that?

1ST SOLDIER.

Why, the Count—hallooing! We must kill her at once.
Come along!

[They go out, right. The curtain falls. NICOLETTE enters from the right in front.]

NICOLETTE.

No one to tell me where to fly,
Who feel so hungry, cold and wet
That almost I could wish to die,—

TROUBADOUR.

No, Nicolette!

NICOLETTE.

What do you here?

TROUBADOUR.

The tale I spin
Has but one quarter woven as yet.

NICOLETTE.

What tale?

TROUBADOUR.

The tale of Aucassin
And Nicolette,
You are my dream.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

If that be true,
Help my fair friend so hard beset !
Will you ? and I will pray for you . . .

TROUBADOUR.

Yes, Nicolette.
Now to the happy greenwood,—fly !

NICOLETTE.

What shall I do if you forget ?
I do so deeply love him,—I,
Your Nicolette.

[She goes out, left. The TROUBADOUR steps to the centre of the stage and speaks to the audience as follows:—]

An interlude, a rest for eye and ear,
A break before the story be renewed,
Is often pleasant. Wherefore grant us here
An interlude ;

Wherein the author may himself intrude,
Telling you frankly much that he might fear
To tell your modern prose-fed multitude,

Who bawl to have the playwright's art appear
Like solid life—a practice vain and crude :
Art is in life a dream, remote but clear,
An interlude !

A singer's tale if all the story treat
Of matter honey-soft will surely fail.
How often do we find it over-sweet,
A singer's tale !

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Here I have thought to load the other scale,
And when the curtain rises you shall meet
With country clowns intent on cheese and ale ;
And then—with what ? Five Saracens, complete
With knives, and flashing looks will turn you pale ;
A banquet, and therewith a rhymed conceit,
A singer's tale.

But now no more : now shall the play unfold
In lengths of patterned language as before.
Haply too much my wagging tongue has told,
But now no more !

Again the Count who broke the vow he swore,
The knight, the maid, shall stand out clear and bold,
Like dim designs that reverent hands restore,
Like figures in a volume bright with gold
That shows the character which life once wore,
And how great dreams could steer the world of old,
But now no more.

[*The TROUBADOUR withdraws. The curtain rises and reveals the greenwood some two hours after dawn. Two shepherds, ROBERT and RUFUS, are breaking the night's fast.*]

ROBERT.

Ale, Rufus, ale ! There is no such balsam for the belly.
There ! [Drinking deep.]

RUFUS.

If I could have talked like you, Robert, with your 'Look you' here and your 'Quoth he' there, I'd never have taken up with sheep. Why, the Count himself would hearken on a Sunday if you were to talk like this in the

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

big church yonder. They'd have made you a bishop by this time, Robert—you take my word for it—and you'd have been straddling a white mare, Robert, and pardoning the sins of the gentry. Sheep!

ROBERT.

A man should moil as his father moiled. I am well-content as I am. Who says that our life is a poor life, and scarce worth the cheese that upholds it? If any man speak thus, Rufus, you may count that man for a bastard. What could be better than to sprawl here under the boughs, with a mug and a round of bread, while the flocks are safe in the valley and the long days begin? The Pope in his gilded castle is not more happy than I, for though my learning be little, my lust of life is great.

RUFUS.

'Tis a fair life, Robert, were it not for the season of shearing and the lack of a laughing wench.

ROBERT.

I never did find such a fellow! You butt at all fences, Rufus. The sun goes round the world without complaining, and the sheep make no dirge though God has denied them wings. Why, then, should man carp and cavil? I think in my mind when I talk with such as you that you eat your hearts out wishing that the moon were square. Now if it were square indeed, you would grieve that it were not round; but what if some whiner like you in the reign of Moses put up a petition to God and had it made round with a prayer? You can never please all the world, as my father was wont to say.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

RUFUS.

A wench is a wench—there's no gainsaying that.

ROBERT.

I never denied it, Rufus ; but listen to me. My father was wont to say, when the flocks were in fold and the stars all blooming and a hot supper settling inside him, 'There's many a wench'—like that, with a wobbling head, 'There's many a wench' . . . I have heard him say it a thousand times.

RUFUS.

Aye, Robert, he was a rare man.

ROBERT.

That was another of his sayings—'Like father, like son' . . . What noise may that be—out yonder ?

RUFUS.

A squirrel, belike, in the new leaves.

ROBERT.

Or a weasel down in the old.

RUFUS (*looking off*).

'Then a weasel that walks in fine silk, Robert ! Now look you there—'tis a wench !

ROBERT.

No woodman's lass but a lady—if indeed she be nothing worse. God shield us ! I like her not. She is far too comely.

RUFUS.

I could swear she is flesh and blood.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

ROBERT.

She is one of the fairy ! Cross yourself ! The fairy-women have beauty, but their beauty brings men to hell.

NICOLETTE (*entering, left*).

Fair children, God shield you !—(*They give no response.*)
God shield you, sirs.

RUFUS.

I pray that He shall.

NICOLETTE.

By your faces I think you be honest, but your greeting belies you.

RUFUS.

What would you with us ?

NICOLETTE.

I had thought to buy food of you, even a morsel. I have passed the night in great peril, and I hoped I might rest in your care for a little space. If you will sell me a loaf or the part of a loaf I will pay you as best I can, but if you deny me this I must go on my way.

RUFUS.

It is hard to deny you, maiden.

ROBERT.

Now, let her go on her way.

RUFUS.

If she swallows meat like a Christian there is nothing to fear.

NICOLETTE.

To fear ? You are frightened of me ? Now pardon me if I laugh, inasmuch as I too was afraid, for I began to think you were robbers.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

RUFUS.

We are simple shepherds, maiden.

NICOLETTE.

Now God be worshipped for that !

RUFUS.

You hear her, Robert ? She thanks God, too, like a Christian.

ROBERT.

What brings you here to the forest ?

NICOLETTE.

Love of a man.

RUFUS.

'Tis a pretty flowered place for loving and the true time of year.

ROBERT.

I think you have lost your wits,—but that is a trifle, maiden.
Sit down. We have cheese and bread ; we have ale and to spare. Sit down.

NICOLETTE.

I thank you heartily. Of a truth I am somewhat faint.
Will you tell me if there be berries in this wood ?

ROBERT.

Now, why do you ask me that ?

NICOLETTE.

Because I shall dwell here long, and would fain learn what I can eat. Hardly, I think, are there springs of ale in the forest or cheese-rings that rise in a night !

RUFUS.

But the cost of bread is little when a maid is fair.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

Again from the heart I thank you. Now say, can you sing?

ROBERT.

Not we.

RUFUS.

Not I, you should say, for Rufus the Shepherd can sing with the best. No doubt you have heard of my skill?

NICOLETTE.

I am very ignorant, shepherd, but if you can sing 'tis enough.

RUFUS.

Now what would you have me sing?

NICOLETTE.

A ditty that I shall teach you, and if ever a knight comes riding among the trees do you sing it that he may hear. And the song is this :

*Never greenwood hid away
Such a hart as thou shalt find;
Hunt her, if thou hast a mind,—
Only hunt to-day!
Hunter, hast thou understood
Who is hiding in this wood?
Surely, yea!*

ROBERT.

A mad song, maiden, but rightly sung.

NICOLETTE.

Do you think that your brain will hold it? The matter is urgent.

RUFUS.

Be calm on that score, maiden.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

Then let me hear you.

RUFUS.

'Never greenwood . . .'

ROBERT.

Too high.

RUFUS.

Had a heart or such a mind . . .'

ROBERT.

Too low.

RUFUS.

Now, Robert, hold thy peace! One or the other must be right, for I have none but those two voices. *'Never maid had such a heart . . .'*

NICOLETTE.

Alas, friend Rufus, I fear you will never learn it. Friend Robert, will you try?

ROBERT.

I will not indeed, for I like not a new ditty, but I will sing you the song that I know. Now Rufus, my lad, *'The Merry Giant.'*

ROBERT and RUFUS.

*Now Charles the Great was a man to see,
Ten foot high as a king should be ;
And forth to the Holy War went he
As the Ram in heaven was climbing.
But who shall tell of the fights he won?
He broke the sky and he found the sun,
And he made the rivers that froze to run,
All on a fair Good Friday.*

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

ROBERT.

A strong song, that.

NICOLETTE.

And rightly sung ! Woe's me that you cannot sing mine !
But if it be so, there is nothing now but to thank you
for your entertainment of me, and then to go forth on
my way.

RUFUS.

Would you go, fair child ? But whither ?

NICOLETTE.

I must build a bower in the forest, a shelter for my body
from the rain, the wind, and the wolves. I pray you tell
me truly, is there aught I may give you for your kind-
ness ? Of silver I have not a groat, but I have jewels.

RUFUS.

You have two white hands ; there are two of us ; and each
has a mouth for kissing.

NICOLETTE.

Now, certes, in that wise I will pay you frankly.

ROBERT

My mind is in labour with a thought.

RUFUS.

A rare thought, by your looks !

ROBERT.

A rare-thought, Rufus. The flocks are at ease in the valley,
—will you deny it ?

RUFUS.

Not I, in good faith. What now ?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

ROBERT.

The maid would build her a bower.

RUFUS.

Your labour is long and hard.

ROBERT.

The flocks are at ease; we have packed our bellies; and the maiden would build her a bower. What hinders, then, that we lend her a hand in the work?

RUFUS.

That will I, gladly!

ROBERT.

Then up and about,—bestir!

NICOLETTE.

Now, God reward you, good friends, for this new grace. Indeed, I am all unskilled in the matter to hand.

ROBERT.

‘A sharp knife will cut boughs,’—that was what my father was wont to say, and like all mother-wit his words are true still. Four stakes long and strong, Rufus,—or fetch a few hurdles, boy! And you,—to the river, maiden! There are willows down yonder. Plait me some osiers for a roof. ‘Now, Charles the Great . . .’

[The curtain falls. In front of it enter from left two serving-men of Count Garin who bring on a table. These are followed by two others with dishes and baskets. They begin to prepare a banquet, the first two following fast as the others go out, and so on and so on.]

1ST SERVANT.

On with you, on with you! Are you a snail?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

2ND SERVANT.

No, but a table is heavy to bear.

1ST SERVANT.

Not as the beating you get if you fail,—
Impudent hypocrite! Fetch in a chair!

[They hurry out, right.]

3RD SERVANT.

This is no work for a man of my size.

4TH SERVANT.

You were at fault,—you were late at the start.
What are you staring at? Down with the pies!

3RD SERVANT.

Look at them! Phew! They should come in a cart.

4TH SERVANT.

Now for the glasses,—the green and the blue.

[They hurry out. The 1ST and 2ND SERVANTS re-enter rapidly.]

1ST SERVANT.

Fret? If I do I have reason to fret,
Bothered and baulk'd by a fellow like you!

[They run out. The 3RD and 4TH SERVANTS re-enter.]

3RD SERVANT.

Why do men eat? I am all in a sweat.

4TH SERVANT.

What would you say, then, if *you* were the cook?
Hurry now!

[The 2ND SERVANT re-enters, carrying a peacock and followed anxiously by the first.]

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

1ST SERVANT.

Fool! Are you running a race?
Carefully! Now you are spilling it,—look!
Here they are coming! Now each in your place!

[*They range themselves composedly behind the chairs. Enter*
COUNT GARIN, AUCASSIN, four LADIES, and two KNIGHTS.]

GARIN.

Fair son, put off this dolorous countenance
And loose again your old fantastic wit.
After the snow, the sun! Beside you sit
The loveliest lilies in the shield of France,
And two such lords as never yet broke lance
But they rode forth victorious. Now admit
The folly of this boyish loving-fit.
Love is not slain by one unhappy chance!

AUCASSIN.

Spare me your words, I pray. Too well you know
The origin of all the tears I shed.

GARIN.

Your Nicolette is dust, and being so
Should plague no more the living. Come,—to meat.

1ST KNIGHT.

'Tis very sure the paynim wench is dead.

1ST LADY (*to Aucassin*).

And very sure, fair lord, that life is sweet.

GARIN.

So then,—be jocund! Had you a thousand years
You might with reason mourn what is no more,
But God has given to men so pinched a store
That he's a fool that squanders one in tears.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

2ND LADY.

And is not Love like music in our ears
When each new song, be it but murmured o'er,
Puts out of tune that which was fair before?

2ND KNIGHT.

It is the wind which very lightly veers,
And if continually it did not change—
Why, we should parch—or drown!

GARIN.

Remember, too,
That in the fact of death is nothing strange.

1ST KNIGHT.

To hunt, to fly the falcon while he can,
To charge upon the foe, to hack and hew—
Such is the only life that fits a man

1ST LADY.

I think Lord Aucassin has loved so well
That nought we say shall move him.

GARIN.

That were right

And most becoming in an amorous knight,
But this wench was a godless infidel,
Damn'd in the womb, a thing to buy and sell!

Ho! the musicians! Let them now recite
Some tale of marvels that his heart grow light.
Where is the singer Bertrand? What? He fell?
Slain in the battle? Is there no minstrel by?
No voice in all the court can rhyme and sing?
None?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

TRUBADOUR (*advancing*).

If you deign to hearken, here am I!

GARIN.

Sir, if my son be cozened by your art
You shall go rich. What story do you bring?

TRUBADOUR.

A new tale called 'The Hunter and the Hart.'

O once in merry Athens town
Lived a prince of wide renown,
And after Mass he rode away
To hunt upon a morn of May.
And on he rode until he stood
In the green sunshine of a wood,
Where, wandering from the rest apart,
He found a wonderful white hart!
So fair she was he could not aim;
But up his jingling followers came,
Beholding whom, in fear she rose
And dashed beyond their singing bows.
And none knew where the hart had fled,
And most were sure that she was dead.

Thereafter, nought
Could chase her from the prince's thought,
Until it happened that one day,
Through dreaming much he went astray,
And lo! upon a sudden saw
The same hart in the self-same shaw!
Rightso he walked with gentle tread
And drew his hand along her head,

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Whereat a wondrous thing befell
For in the act he broke a spell
That fresh and fair in light and shade
Before him stood a robeless maid !
And then the prince (who was not I)
Said, ' What name shall I call thee by ?'
And she, with dark head sideways set,
Gave answer, ' Not Jehane nor yet
Yolande, nor Anys nor Sylvette
But . . . ' What it was, I quite forget !

AUCASSIN.

There never was a fair tale sweetlier told:

GARIN.

Now well done, singer ! Here is a purse of gold !

AUCASSIN (*rising*).

My lord, and you that listen, when I heard
Your speech of love I answered back no word,
Whereat you marvelled. Now these cunning rhymes
Resolve me to speak out to you betimes,
Having drawn tense my will to loose a deed
That shall amaze your wits. Why should I heed
What you that never touched the hem of love,
You that blaspheme, shall think or say thereof ?
Think what you must, say what you will, declare
That like the wind it is, now here, now there,
A song sweet only till the next be played—
But not in such wise have I loved my maid !
Love is the worth of life, and you, condemned
Never to know it, wear a ring disgemmed ;

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Love is a light at sea, a star that draws
The hungering soul back to its ancient Cause ;
A dream of God, a traveller's wonder-tale,
The wide world's quest—love is the Holy Grail !
To find the Grail, tend it, and keep it fair
With worship and a never-slackening care,
Such is my will. Wherefore I tell you straight
That as for me your counsels come too late,
For I fare forth beyond the city's wall—
Not to return ! So may God speed you all.

GARIN.

What tricks are these ? I'll hear no more ! Sit down !

1ST LADY.

Poor knight !

2ND LADY.

His brain is gone !

2ND KNIGHT.

To leave the town

And go forth like a beggar !

GARIN.

Hear you that ?

How will you live ? where is your palmer's hat ?
Where your monk's bowl ? how will you live, I say ?
You cannot live on love,—not for one day !

AUCASSIN.

If any knight follows me now, I swear
That the last banquet he shall see lies there !

[AUCASSIN *goes out, right.*]

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

GARIN.

Take up the feast ! For this insane offence
I crave your pardon, ladies. Get you hence.
[*To the knights.*] If we are prompt we might be able still
To close the gates, and what we can we will.

[*They all go out, left, the servants dexterously removing the table, the chairs and the feast. The curtain goes up. Late afternoon in the greenwood. NICOLETTE'S bower of branches in leaf stands builded to the left. ROBERT and RUFUS on the right are throwing quoits, twisted of osiers, at an upright snag.*]

RUFUS.

Six of the ten on the stake ! Victory, Robert ! Twenty to your fifteen !

ROBERT.

I threw very ill. Well, well, she will follow your sheep to-morrow, but I had her to-day for my friend. To-morrow I'll win her again, I swear, for I miss the maid sadly when she takes your side of the water. 'Tis time we went to the flocks.

RUFUS (*going out with him, right*).

Twenty to your fifteen !

ROBERT (*turning back*).

Rufus, my hand was out. I cannot leave it at mere fifteen,—a meagre, paltry, beggarly, snivelling number that ill befits me. Go you ahead, and I will follow you briskly. (*RUFUS goes out, right.*) My hand was out. I shall never win her again if I cast no better than that. Now for a trial, and may I bestake them all ! A miss ! Who is that ? A horn close by in the trees. The Devil take it ! Another, another gone wide,—and again that horn !

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Now the Devil take him that blows it for I cannot throw straight. But haply the poor lad is lost,—hollo there, hollo! A lord by his looks, yet I would he had fixed on a better time if he must go astray. That's well,—he is off. You could never bring a charger through these briars.

[He throws two or three more quoits while he can.]

AUCASSIN (*entering, right*).

Fair child, God shield you!

ROBERT.

Lord Aucassin! What do you seek?

AUCASSIN.

I seek for a strange white hart which a singer told me lies hidden here in this wood.

ROBERT.

I did hear one sing of a hart.

AUCASSIN.

Now God reward you! Sing me again that song.

ROBERT.

Indeed I will not, for I know you well. They say that you are at odds with the Count, but I am the Count's true man. I will sing you no song, fair child,—nevertheless I will tell you the story in prose.

AUCASSIN.

Better a tale in prose than no tale at all.

ROBERT.

Well, to the woodland a maiden came . . .

AUCASSIN.

Slender was she, and dark?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

ROBERT.

I shall come to the maiden anon. Her eyes were lustrous
and large,—

AUCASSIN.

And had she a full kind serious mouth?

ROBERT.

Her voice was a wonder to hear—

AUCASSIN.

Soft and caressing, a voice to assuage all sorrows.

ROBERT.

And mark you, she walked with her head a little inclined.

AUCASSIN.

Tell me, oh tell me, where did she go, that singer?

NICOLETTE (*in her bower*).

Hunter, hast thou understood

Who is hiding in this wood?

Surely, yea!

ROBERT.

Fair knight, I am the Count's man and I will not say where
she went. God speed you.

[*He goes out, right. NICOLETTE comes with open hands to the
door of her bower.*]

NICOLETTE.

O fair sweet friend, welcome with all my heart!

Longing is bitter sweetness.

AUCASSIN.

Nicolette,

How wonderful it is to see your life,

To see your hand move and your lips divide!

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

Dear heart, you thought me dead.

AUCASSIN.

You might have starved,
You might have fallen among the forest wolves,
And here—you live!

NICOLETTE.

I am more glad of life
Now, for your sake and mine, than ever yet.

AUCASSIN.

I would kneel down before your spirit. Sweet,
Are you not very Love made manifest?
Nothing I know of holier in the world
Than this fair form that is so near your soul.

NICOLETTE.

Love is the heart's religion, a deep joy
Half-hushed, and I too worship when I love.

AUCASSIN (*settling beside her*).

Before we go—where shall we go, I wonder,
Now that our life has dawned?

NICOLETTE.

What matter where?
For now there is no port in all the world
But opens into heaven. Across the sea—
Let us live somewhere far across the sea.

AUCASSIN.

Near by there is a silver-sanded cove
Where foreign ships put in. There will we ride—
Then sail where fortune bids!

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

It is as though God cried on us to live
In splendour like His own !

AUCASSIN.

See how the sun
In this one hour builds upward on the air
Glories that in a myriad years of time
And with a myriad hands men could not match !

NICOLETTE.

Round the whole world the flood of beauty spreads—
Ah see, the little moon ! That is like me.
Here do I stand before you, I your bride,
Under the ancient moon.

AUCASSIN.

And all your face
Glow in the deep fire of the ancient sun
As round your unseen spirit glows my love.

NICOLETTE.

I am your wedded friend !

AUCASSIN.

O I could think
The very trees are happier for our lives !
Now is the world so beautiful that at last
Our spirits can be one—your mouth, your mouth !
Once let us kiss, and then in silence go.

[*The curtain falls. Three SARACENS enter from the right.*]

1ST SARACEN.

What are they ? Spanish pirates ?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

2ND SARACEN.

No,

They wear long turbans green and white.

1ST SARACEN.

From our own land !

3RD SARACEN.

Please Allah so,

All Christendom shall sleep to-night
Till we be launched and well at sea.

1ST SARACEN.

These men will fight us. Curse their sails—
Confound them ! . . . Well, what is must be.
Go through the plunder.

2ND SARACEN.

Fourteen bales

Of hide and wool ; of sheep a score
(But two went down among the waves
In shipping them) ; a goodly store
Of spears and hauberks . . .

1ST SARACEN.

What of slaves ?

2ND SARACEN.

Four virgins and a dozen men.

1ST SARACEN.

Of wine ?

2ND SARACEN.

Two score and thirteen jars.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

1ST SARACEN.

Let us give thanks to Allah. Then,
With such fair winds and open stars,
Push out for Spain.

[Two SARACENS enter cautiously from the left.]

4TH SARACEN.

Ho there,—a word!

1ST SARACEN (*turning*).

May fortune crown your enterprise!
What would you?

4TH SARACEN.

Noble sheikh, we heard,—

In fact we saw with our own eyes,—
That you have slaves. Now so have we:

Wherefore, lest all should go not well,
When both our ships are on one sea,

But avarice make the crews rebel,
Play me at dice! If you should win,

My slaves are yours. You understand?

1ST SARACEN.

A bargain to my mind! Begin.

4TH SARACEN.

With equal stakes on either hand.

1ST SARACEN.

The four and five.

4TH SARACEN.

The five and ace.

1ST SARACEN.

Aha! The double six!

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

5TH SARACEN.

Beware !

4TH SARACEN.

What is it ?

5TH SARACEN.

Look, they come apace . . .

A man and maid dismounting there !

4TH SARACEN.

One only,—good.

1ST SARACEN (*to 2nd and 3rd*).

Get out your knives ;

Have the cords ready !

4TH SARACEN (*to 5th*).

Quick,—the cords !

[AUCASSIN *enters*, followed by NICOLETTE.]

AUCASSIN (*starting back*).

Now Holy Mary shield our lives !

These are no traders,—look, their swords !

1ST SARACEN.

One to him ! Bind him !

4TH SARACEN.

Grip her fast !

AUCASSIN.

Saracens !

1ST SARACEN (*having with the 2nd and 3rd almost overpowered*

AUCASSIN).

Will you live or die ?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

God knows !

NICOLETTE (*struggling with the 4TH and 5TH SARACENS*).

You shall not !

4TH SARACEN (*securing her*).

'Tame at last !

1ST SARACEN.

The cord, the cord !

AUCASSIN (*slaying him*).

There shall you lie !

What ! am I caught ? Not yet, not yet !

2ND SARACEN.

Firm on the leash !

NICOLETTE.

Now God befriend !

AUCASSIN,

My Nicolette, my Nicolette !

NICOLETTE.

Be still ! You do but speed the end.

AUCASSIN.

I cannot come.

NICOLETTE.

Be still, be still.

4TH SARACEN.

On now for Carthage !

2ND SARACEN.

On for Spain !

AUCASSIN.

For Carthage ?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

4TH SARACEN.

Aye,—or where we will.

Drag her along!

[*The 4TH and 5TH SARACENS drive NICOLETTE out, left.*]

AUCASSIN.

Put out my pain,—

Kill me!

3RD SARACEN.

No, no,—we want your worth!

[*The 2ND and 3RD SARACENS drag him out, right. At once the 4TH and 5TH SARACENS re-appear, left.*]

4TH SARACEN.

They left him! Quickly,—take the head.

There's many a man alive on earth

Carries less money than one dead.

[*They bear off, left, the body of the 1ST SARACEN. The TROUBADOUR advances to the centre of the stage.*]

TROUBADOUR.

Poor lovers! Out across the sea

They journey, she

To Carthage now, forlorn again,

And he to Spain!

Should any here, perhaps apart

In his own heart,

Say 'But has any love on earth

So great a worth?'

I counsel him to bear in mind

A song designed

For just so poor a heart as his—

And here is is:

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

(singing to his lute)

*Did you ever love so well
That you tossed away all care
What in after-time befell?
Answer 'Nay,' and I declare
Many and many a dead man knew
Better how to live than you.*

*Answer 'Yea,' and you can laugh
With the greatest Earth has known;
Alexander did not quaff
Life more golden than your own!
If in truth you tell me 'Yea,'
Smile at Time, and go your way!*

To Carthage town has come the maid,
There, unafraid,
Within the King's own sleeping-room
To learn her doom.
What strange adventures Nicolette
Shall meet with yet—
And shining at the end thereof,
What joy of love!

[*The TROUBADOUR withdraws. The curtain rises, revealing the bed-chamber of the KING at Carthage. A vast four-poster stands in the centre. The KING, who is very massive, lies in it asleep. At the back, to the right of the bed, is a curtained opening, and there is another to each side of the room. A few swarthy slaves are waiting for the KING to wake.*]

THE KING (*slowly waking up*).
I paid your money, now give me the moon . . .
Ah! . . . Carthage, yes. What is the hour? Past noon!

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Well, well! Be silent all! No man shall dare
To *breathe* before a royal nose. Beware!
Take off my nightcap. Give me yonder crown,
For I have business. What did I set down?

[*He consults his tablets.*]

'The war with Rome. Inspection of new slaves.
'The Mayor of Carthage very humbly craves . . .'
A good man—let him crave. The Roman war—
They treat my threats like . . . what, perhaps they are!
And if I see no way to check the strife,
Carthage goes under. Now, upon my life,
If that one child, my daughter, should come home
I could betroth her to the King of Rome,
And save the world. But fourteen years have passed,
Fourteen years now, since I beheld her last.
They brushed aside the offers that I made—
To marry with their blood—and merely said,
Like envying wasps outside the honey-hives,
'Already you have eight-and-thirty wives!'
Poor foolish Christians! I, for my own part,
If so the war might cease, with all my heart,
Would marry every wench in Christendom.

[*Enter 4TH SARACEN, left.*]

Well, well, what now? You mean the slaves are come?
Bring them to me.

[*The 4TH and 5TH SARACENS lead on NICOLETTE in chains.*]

4TH SARACEN.

Behold, O King of Kings,
A virgin perfected by nineteen springs,
Well-favoured, richly coloured, ripe and fresh—

AUCASSIN AND NICOTETTE

(*To 5th Saracen.* Turn her round)—see, how smooth and fine her flesh !

THE KING.

From France ?

4TH SARACEN.

My lord, if so you tell a maid
You soon would find a fortune at our trade !
A bargain, sire ! (*Loosen your hair.*) In short,
Of royal blood, from great King Louis' court.

NICOLETTE.

It is not true.

THE KING.

How now ? What do you mean ?

NICOLETTE.

I am not French, nor have I ever seen
The royal court of France.

4TH SARACEN.

You know their whims !

But look you, sire, what lithe and handsome limbs,
What hair !

THE KING.

Your tale !

NICOLETTE.

I was but five years old
When I was stolen, put to sea, and sold
In France for silver.

THE KING.

Fourteen years ago !
Whence did you come ? Can you remember ?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

No,

But from a palace.

THE KING.

Good!

And I recall

Faintly green domes, and palms . . .

THE KING (*eagerly*):

But not at all

The face of your dear father?

NICOLETTE.

No, indeed.

THE KING.

A pity!

NICOLETTE.

Why?

THE KING.

Perhaps there is no need.

Put up your chin! By my immortal soul,

There at her throat the little tawny mole!

Come to my arms!

4TH SARACEN.

You buy her then?

THE KING.

Begone!

Do you know who it is you look upon?

Carthage in bed,—the King of Carthage,—yes,

Your father!

NICOLETTE (*shuddering*).

No!

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE.

THE KING.

Bring me my morning-dress !

Now help me up. Send trumpeters about
Proclaiming that the war with Rome is out. [*Exit 1ST SLAVE.*
To-morrow you shall wed—

NICOLETTE.

I will not wed.

[*They knock off her chains.*

THE KING.

Go to !

NICOLETTE.

Much rather would I join the dead.

THE KING.

You shall be Queen of Rome.

NICOLETTE.

But I declare

I know you not.

THE KING.

We have no time to spare.

The mole condemns you. Sirrah, take the news
At full speed to the King. [*Exit 2ND SLAVE.*

NICOLETTE.

But I refuse

To be your daughter !

THE KING.

Who can put down Fate ?

This after-thought comes nineteen years too late.
Up and about ! Wreath all the pillars round
With leafy fruits, and lay along the ground

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

The richest of our carpets. You shall bring (to 3RD SLAVE)
The notary ; I myself will fetch the ring.

[*They all go out except NICOLETTE.*]

NICOLETTE.

They shall not make me wed, nor will I die,
But somehow get to sea, somehow escape
Down to the sand-hills where the vessels lie,
And so to France,—but in some manlier shape
Or men will trap me. Yes, it was from here
(*going to opening*)

They brought the King his gown. Oh, happy chance !
The royal wardrobe ! Now, while none is near,
I'll shed my chrysalis, and wing to France !

[*She goes through the curtains to right. The two SARACENS enter, pursued, through the curtain behind.*]

4TH SARACEN.

No way out here and no way out there ! We are caught
like fish in a net.

5TH SARACEN.

Who could have known that she was the king's own daughter ?
We must meet our fate as we may.

4TH SARACEN.

You can sit there cool as a stone ?

5TH SARACEN.

There is nothing but Fate.

4TH SARACEN.

Nothing but Fate ! There is no one about and you say there
is nothing but Fate ! When the sword has cloven my
neck I will say you were right, but not until then, as I

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

live. Nothing but Fate! Why, fool, there are curtains and pillars and a bed that would cover an elephant, aye, or a pair! Go, shelter yourself under Fate, but I put my trust in a bed.

[He scrambles into the King's bed, and covers himself from head to foot in the clothes.] |

5TH SARACEN.

Maybe you are right. Make room!

4TH SARACEN.

Not I! If you come here too they will see us.

5TH SARACEN.

I will take the chance.

4TH SARACEN.

No, no,—it is better that one should die than two.

5TH SARACEN.

They are coming! Make room!

4TH SARACEN.

Get off!

[The 4th SARACEN successfully repulses him. He runs hither and thither, and finally hides himself in the hangings of the bed. The 4th SARACEN looks out for a moment, then vanishes again.]

4TH SARACEN.

If you cough or sneeze or move,—we are dead.

[The KING rushes in with two slaves.]

THE KING.

Find them! Find them! Hunt them down, I say! Each head is a bag of gold for the man that brings it! What? What? She is gone! My daughter,—the princess—

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

gone! Let the men go whither they will, but find the princess! Away!

[The slaves run off, left. The 5TH SARACEN sneezes.]

An ambush! 'There in the bed? Sacrilege, sacrilege!

[He discovers the 4TH SARACEN in the bed.]

4TH SARACEN.

It was not my sneeze! O spare me!

THE KING.

Help ho! We have caught them now!

[The 5TH SARACEN escapes, left. NICOLETTE runs in disguised as a minstrel. She carries a part of the garment in which she came.]

NICOLETTE.

Look you, sire, look! It was lying there on the floor.

THE KING.

She has dropped her garment, and flown!

NICOLETTE.

Follow the clue! Go in!

THE KING.

I will, I will. And you, sirrah, look to that rogue. Slay him,—but not in the bed, for the sheets are of Persian silk.

[The KING goes out, left.]

4TH SARACEN.

Spare me my life! I will serve you, sir, as your slave.

NICOLETTE.

Swear by the Prophet!

4TH SARACEN.

I swear.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

Follow me quickly, sailor. Down to the ships!

[They go out, left. The KING returns. The curtain falls. Enter, left, in front, 1ST SERVANT, closely muffled up. He staggers along with a large box. In his hand is a horn lantern. He is quickly overtaken by RUFUS, ragged and wounded.]

1ST SERVANT.

Let the Count fume, let the Count rail, let the Count curse,
but a man must pause with a load like sin on his back
and the snow and the mud as high as midsummer grass.
Phew! 'Tis a mad night,—but the wind is a sane fellow,
for he never howls but when the moon is hid.

RUFUS.

Ho there,—a friend!

SERVANT.

What are you, sirrah?

RUFUS.

Faith, if you ask what I was I shall answer 'a shepherd':
if you ask what I am I shall answer that I am a thing
without name.

SERVANT.

Do you set me to solve your riddles on a night like this?

RUFUS.

I would you could salve my riddled body, for I come from a
fray with the Saracens,—may the Devil swallow their
race! I have news for Lord Aucassin. Is it true he is
home again?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

SERVANT.

True! It is all as true as that I am ill-pleased to know it. He paid his ransom in Spain, and he came to the castle to-night. This box that I bear is full of rejoicings,—food and wine to set up the Count—but I shall rejoice when I set it down!

RUFUS.

For the Count, you say?

SERVANT.

For the Count. When the father dies the son inherits the castle. You hill-side clowns know nothing!

RUFUS.

He is Count of Beaucaire! Well, well! Now lend me the eyes of your lantern and lead me on to the Count.

SERVANT.

I will lend you a light if you will lend me a hand.

RUFUS.

Come along.

[*They go out, right. The curtain rises. AUCASSIN is seated at a table, examining a map. RUFUS stands before him.*]

RUFUS.

You saw him once.

AUCASSIN.

I well recall

His burly shape and bushy head.

RUFUS.

And eyes that when he laughed grew small,—
Grey eyes that now are dull as lead.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

You loved him well.

RUFUS.

So too the maid,—
How glad she was to hear him laugh !
'I'll score up on this tree,' she said,
'The number of ale-jugs you quaff !'
A merry maid ! To lie out there,
Mangled by that foul paynim horde !
We struck with all our might, I swear,
But can a staff beat down a sword ?
He had not even breath to say
One Paternoster. When he fell
They jeered, and drove our flocks away,—
Would God it might have been to Hell !
Grant me this grace before I go,
To give her in a dead man's name
This little copper ring, if so
It chances that with you she came ?

AUCASSIN.

With me ! Long since in Carthage town
They sold her for a slave. To-night,
Though all the hail of heaven come down
And all the sea put forth its might,
I mean to sail. I mean to sail
Until I find her, though that be
At the Earth's edge : and if I fail
'Tis farewell to the world for me !

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

RUFUS.

Mine is a strong arm ! Let me go !
For God's sake let me pull an oar !
She was all beauty.

AUCASSIN.

Do you know
What nights of peril lie in store ?
We may be wrecked. We may be slain.
The seas are white, and very few
Have courage to put forth again,—
I have but twelve men in my crew,
All desperate. If you sail with me
The issue lies on your own head.
You risk your life.

RUFUS.

To sea, to sea !
Who should care now though I were dead ?

AUCASSIN.

Down to the harbour, then. We start
At midnight, be it foul or fair.
God speed you !— Now again my chart,—
The track to Carthage from Beaucaire . . .

[*The curtain falls. NICOLETTE comes on, left, in her disguise of a minstrel. She meets with RUFUS.*]

NICOLETTE.

God shield you, friend.

RUFUS.

God shield you also, fair sir, if you be no Saracen ; but if
you be a sheep-robber and worship in a turban you shall
never soil Beaucaire.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

NICOLETTE.

I am a minstrel, and I seek Lord Aucassin.—Tell me, is he alive?

RUFUS.

He is, but his father is dead. He is Count of Beaucaire, and a noble master.

NICOLETTE.

It is said that he went from the town for love of a certain maid.

RUFUS.

He will go from the town again for love of that maid,—ah, singer, that you might set her name in a rhyme! He will challenge the sea to-night.

NICOLETTE.

No, not to-night!

RUFUS.

You will hardly withhold him, singer.

NICOLETTE.

To what land would he sail?

RUFUS.

To a town called Carthage. It lies on the rim of the World.

NICOLETTE.

It is from Carthage I come.

RUFUS.

Then indeed you will find warm welcome. You have brought him news of the maid?

NICOLETTE.

News of Nicolette, both strange news and sweet.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

RUFUS.

If the news be false you are like to dangle in the snow till dawn from the topmost tower of the city! You keep your hood close. I like not that. Show me your face like a Christian, or by Saint Dennis I will smash your infidel bones!

NICOLETTE (*turning round to him so that he sees her face*).

News of Nicolette, Rufus,—news in no way false. Bring me at once to the Castle, but tell no man my secret.

RUFUS.

But here is a wonder of wonders!

NICOLETTE.

Lead me along.

RUFUS.

O darling Lady of Love! Follow me fast. Now let the wind roar and the sea rage, for Rufus and the Count shall sleep on land! O Robert, poor Robert,—he loved you well . . .

[*They go out, right. The curtain goes up. AUCASSIN stands between the 1ST and 2ND KNIGHTS.*]

AUCASSIN.

Fair friends, my mind is firm. I give you thanks
For such kind counsel, but the night draws on.

2ND KNIGHT.

You trust your soul to some few wooden planks
In winds like these? Think—if the maid be gone—
Bartered from land to land—of what avail
Were all this peril?

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

1ST KNIGHT.

Why, you will never fare
Beyond the harbour mouth.

AUCASSIN.

I mean to sail.

1ST KNIGHT.

Send messengers to learn if she be there . . .

AUCASSIN.

I could not wait their news.

1ST KNIGHT.

If you set out
You'll lie to-morrow twenty fathoms deep,
For once at sea no ship could turn about.

2ND KNIGHT.

A lover should not sell his life so cheap.
Love, and hope on !

AUCASSIN.

Hope is a Friday broth,
And I want food ! Better to burn your cloak
Than leave it to the slow-devouring moth !
I would chance all upon a single stroke,
And have life worth the living out, or die.
My plans are fixed. Here is my chest, you see,
Corded for transit. Bid me now good-bye.
And inasmuch as none knows what shall be,
Pledge me in wine !

[*He holds out a goblet. RUFUS enters, right.*]

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

RUFUS.

Sweet news, Lord Aucassin !

AUCASSIN.

Tell me anon.

RUFUS.

The matter will not stand.

Here is a minstrel that you *must* let in,—
From Carthage,—come this very hour to land.

He saw her, knew her, spoke with her, can tell
The whole fair story.

AUCASSIN.

No ! A dozen times

I met his match in Spain, and all too well
I know the falsehood in his honeyed rhymes !

1ST KNIGHT.

Yet you should hear him.

2ND KNIGHT.

What if this were truth ?

AUCASSIN.

Eat poisoned figs, and thank him for his grace ?
I care not ! Bid him enter.

RUFUS.

Come, fair youth !

NICOLETTE.

Has he no care to see the singer's face ?

He is too sad. When you have heard my tale,
Count, you will find that you are cured of grief,
And bid the captain of your ship strike sail.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN.

Tell me your story, but, I pray, be brief.

NICOLETTE.

Now when she entered Carthage town
The old king eyed her up and down.
He marked the mole beneath her chin
Where once the dear prince Aucassin
Had kissed her very kindly. Then
Cried Saladin to all his men,
'Behold,—my daughter! Bring the priest,
And deck with gold her marriage feast!'

AUCASSIN.

It is not true!

NICOLETTE.

But Nicolette without one word
Fled unbeholden and unheard,
Fled to the sea, and in disguise
That would have trapped her lover's eyes
If at this hour and in this hall
She stood before him. Fair and tall
Her ship spread wings to cross the sea,—
Whither,—who knows?

AUCASSIN.

Ah me, ah me.

If I but knew!

NICOLETTE.

What man has wit enough to say
If she to-night be far away

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Or haply near, and very near,
The lover-prince who waits for her?

AUCASSIN.

I pray you, cease !
As yet you do not know how much
A wound hurts at the softest touch.
Have you deceived me ?

RUFUS.

Master, no !
Prove with your eyes it is not so—

NICOLETTE (*half smiling*).

Ah, hold your peace !

RUFUS.

I cannot. Master . . .

AUCASSIN (*rising*).

Tell me truth,
Singer ! Are you indeed a youth ?

NICOLETTE. .

Set back my hood, and if I be,
O love my love, put out to sea !

AUCASSIN (*discovering her*).

O glory ! O the wonder ! Fair
Sweet friend !

NICOLETTE.

I think I hardly dare
Be quite so happy ; yet to-night
Does but begin our hearts' delight !

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

AUCASSIN (*taking the goblet of wine*).

This for a pledge ; I lift it up,—
The Grail of Love, the Loving-cup !
Would we had here,—no chilling priest
For whom love's half a sin at least,—
But one that in himself has known
A great love-glory like our own,—
A singer !

TROUBADOUR (*advancing*).

Then with all my heart
Will I take up so fair a part.
Smile if you list ; but I shall prove
A very serious priest of love !

Life, to be lived as He that gave it planned,
Should be well-poised, and run to no extreme.
First we should honour God whose mighty hand
Bridged with Eternity Time's hurrying stream ;
Wherefore I bid you kneel ; but having bowed
Before the mystery of the world we see
And our own spirits, we should go forth proud
And joyous for the pure delight to be !
Wherefore I bid you rise. Take up the bowl,
Maiden, and serve your love in these two ways,
With equal homage both of sense and soul.
Drink, gentle knight. Remember all your days
That love can breathe not where the air is dense
And must be worshipped both of soul and sense.

(*The Curtain falls.*)

1913-14.

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